

異世界居酒屋

isekai izakaya "NOBU" 2hai-me
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Different World Tavern Nobu

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- Volume 2 -

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Chapter 38

The Female Mercenary (Part 1)

As she rested, she looked up at the blue sky and saw a pair of black kite birds. Leontaine du Louve sat on her armor chest and wiped the sweat off of her forehead. The sun shone on the wheat fields on the hillside, giving the waves of grain an amber hue. Castle walls towered over the other side, where the Old Capital, the most strategic location in the northern part of the Empire, was situated.

Leontaine had some confidence in her physical strength, despite being a woman, but she was really exhausted because of an incident that had happened in the last few days.

Everything had been going well until she had been attacked by three bandits. She had managed to chase them away with her trusty beloved sword, but the problem was that her horse had run away during the commotion.

It wasn't possible to throw away her ancestral suit of armour, so she could only tie a hemp rope to the armor chest and advance westward along the highway, for the time being. Although she had passed by a carriage along the way, the carriage was already packed with luggage, so they didn't have any room to spare for a single frail woman, who would become a burden, and her armor chest on the carriage.

Leontaine continued walking throughout the night, resenting the narrow-minded Imperial people who disdained others, before she finally reached a hill where she could see the Old Capital.

Even though there was nothing she could do about the heat and humidity, the gentle breeze was comfortable.

Leontaine unintentionally recalled the beaches back in her hometown in the Eastern Kingdom as the wind caressed her now loosened cheeks.

It was ridiculous to set up camp when the castle walls were already in sight. The female mercenary got up with one last burst of energy. She wanted to sleep in the bed of an inn tonight.

The sun had begun to set when she finally reached the east gate of the Old Capital. The gatekeeper, who sported a short moustache, grew suspicious of the female

mercenary, who was dragging along an armor chest, and did not want to let her pass through so easily.

If the situation didn't change, the gate would close at sundown. Leontaine realised that the gatekeeper was asking for a bribe.

"You're looking to earn some extra money, huh..."

"It's work, you know. Work. If something were to occur, I couldn't possibly report to my superior that a suspicious mercenary was shown into the Old Capital, right?"

"This isn't really showing someone in, though."

"It's fine today. We have to settle the problem regarding the conference with the three northern territories first. The number of people and things that were coming and going were increasing and it became very busy. Even people who were a little bit suspicious were turned away from entering, you know."

That was true. The fact that the carriage, which Leontaine had previously passed, was fully loaded with luggage was a good sign that the trade with the North was becoming more favourable.

The three northern territories, especially that of Earl Wyndelmarc, had hired many mercenaries; but had since released them. The mercenaries were reimbursed half the agreed payment for breaking the contract. They wanted to hurry back home to spend the money, so the inns along the highways were packed with activity.

"In that case, could you let me through as it is?"

"You seem to be a female mercenary, but are you a Knight?"

"That's sharp of you..."

"That armor chest is something you would only find with people from your region, and it is something that's more of a burden than anything else for the ones who do have it."

"I never would've thought my hometown would be exposed. You're very perceptive for a gatekeeper. Are all the guards of the Old Capital like this?"

The moustached sentry guard shrugged a little as he received the silver coins for the

regular entry tax, plus the small extra tip from her.

“That’s impossible. There are no other tactful lady-killers among the sentry guards in the Old Capital here, aside from Nikolaus.”

“C’est la vie. Then, while you’re being tactful, could you tell me where I could find a pub with good alcohol? Frankly, I’m so famished that I could die.”

(TL:Replaced “Such is life” with “C’est la vie” because she has a French name.)

Nikolaus loosened his cheeks and grinned widely at Leontaine’s frivolous talk.

“Pub, huh. I know a good place. There’s no other store like it.”

As she walked according to the given directions, she reached a street with a pleasant atmosphere.

The cargo carriers and the cheap looking lodging houses that travellers used were built right next to each other. There also seemed to be inns where Leontaine, the female mercenary, wouldn’t have problems staying at.

Among them, one bar stood out.

Although all the surrounding shops were made of stone, only one of them was built out of wood and plaster.

The store’s name was Izakaya Nobu. It was written on a big flat signboard, with foreign letters also written on it.

“This is that guard’s favourite place, huh.”

She wasn’t able to shake off the suspicion that the store had given gold to people so that they would recommend it to anyone when asked.

Even so, she had already come this far. It was also troublesome to search for other stores, so Leontaine decided to enter the store without complaining.

“Welcome!”

“...elcome.”

When she opened the door, the first thing that surprised her was how cold it was. Even though she did not understand the mechanism behind it, she did not feel any of the heat and humidity from outside the store. Also, this scent...

The store was pretty crowded, but a person had just left his seat, so there was now an empty seat by the counter.

Once Leontaine slipped into the store and sat down at her seat, she raised her hand to call the waitress.

For now, she needed a drink first, then food.

Anyway, if she did not sate her hunger with various things, it would get in the way of her true purpose for coming to the Old Capital.

“Here is your *otoshi*.”

(*TL note: as previously mentioned, otoshi: appetizer*)

The lovely, black-haired waitress served a small bowl that contained simmered shellfish.

Even though they had been removed from their shells, Leontaine, who grew up on the beach, recognised that they were shellfish with just one look. Had they simmered it in alcohol? It smelled good.

Otoshi was not the name of this dish. She figured that it was probably an appetizer that was served before the meal.

“This pub is quite stylish to even serve *amuse-gueule*, isn’t it?”

(*TL note: amuse-gueule: appetizer in French*)

“Thank you very much. Today’s *otoshi* is *torigai*. It’s delicious, you know.”

(*TL note: torigai: Japanese cockle.*)

“Torigai, huh.”

With the carefree attitude of those who worked in the mercenary business, Leontaine picked up the simmered *torigai* with her fingers and threw it into her mouth. The shellfish, which had a wriggly texture, tasted a little bit like chicken.

The chef was likely very skilled, since the bad smell was completely removed and the soup stock worked well.

She would have eaten as much as she liked if it were not for the small bowl.

“This is good. A store that serves good appetizers can be trusted. Can I have ale?”

“Certainly.”

Her small bowing gesture was also beautiful.

Leontaine was a knight who was familiar with high society, and it was difficult to find a good maid like her.

She was glad to be introduced to an unexpectedly good store and picked up a second piece of *torigai*.

“Yes, here’s one ‘Nama’.”

“‘Nama’, I have not heard that name before. Is this the local ale?”

“No, this is lager.”

“Lager...”

She had heard of the name before.

It seemed that it was made with a slightly different method from that of making ale, and the Empire should have monopolized its production and circulation.

She felt like she had heard rumors about the ban being lifted a while ago.

“He~eh, how surprising.”

The cold lager that smoothly washed down her throat felt soothing beyond imagination.

The deliciousness soaked into Leontaine’s body, which had accumulated fatigue since yesterday.

“The ‘Toriaezu Nama is delicious isn’t it’?”

It was someone other than the waitress from a while ago. It was a waitress with beige-coloured hair who spoke to her while being a little shy. Even though she was still young, she had quite the pretty face.

“I think I heard ‘Nama’ a while ago, but do you call this lager, ‘Toriaezu Nama’?”

“Yeah, all the regulars call it that.”

The minimum requirement for a pub to be good was to have regular customers.

People who did business just to rip off a first-time customer or a traveller were definitely not a decent bunch.

“Customer-san, so what would you like to order?”

“I’m fine with anything except potatoes. As long as it’s not potatoes. I ate so many potatoes up north that I’m sick of them.”

Earl Wyndelmarc was a good noble who made sure that the mercenaries received proper meals, but the meals mostly consisted of potatoes. During her time in the North, Leontaine had eaten more potatoes than anybody who lived in the Eastern Kingdom would ever eat in their lifetime.

“Actually, I’ve been curious since earlier... but what is that smell?”

“Ah, that smell? Which one would you like, customer-san?”

“Which what?”

“My *ushiojiru* or Taisho’s reworked faux bouillabaisse? Both are also delicious, you know.”

(TL note: *ushiojiru*: clear clam soup)



When she looked at where the waitress was pointing, the words ‘Helmina’s special *ushiojiru*’ and ‘Taisho’s special faux bouillabaisse’ were messily written on wooden

signs.

The tally marks underneath were probably a popularity poll. Currently, the *ushiojiru* seemed to be in the lead.

“I understand what *ushiojiru* is. It’s a salty soup stewed with fish leftovers, right? Then what on earth is a ‘faux bouillabaisse?’”

“It’s vegetables that are briefly stir fried, and boiled together with tomatoes and seafood.”

She understood when she heard it. There was a similar dish in Leontaine’s hometown. But there, it was not called with a fancy name like bouillabaisse. Instead, the fishermen back in her village would have simply called it boiled rockfish with tomatoes.

“Ah, then I’ll get that bouillabaisse. Afterwards, another glass of ‘Toriaezu Nama’.”

“Yes, thank you very much.”

Helmina made a slight bow and returned to the kitchen to convey the orders. She was graceful and bubbly. Completely different from Leontaine, who had lived her life on a battlefield. It was different like wolves and dogs.

A noble lady’s way of life might be different as well. When she thought like that, her loneliness suddenly re-emerged.

She had decided to disguise herself as a mercenary because of poverty, but if she had wanted to, she could’ve chose another path.

However, Leontaine was already 26 years old this year. She did not feel like dressing up in a dress and making an appearance in high society now. Even though she did not have any regrets, she couldn’t do anything about it anymore.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

She took a taste of the bouillabaisse that Helmina served with a wooden spoon.

“Huh...”

The flavour of the shrimp and other seafoods were deeply incorporated into the soup. Even though it was a little different from the boiled rockfish with tomatoes from her home, it had a nostalgic taste.



“This is delicious!”

“I prepared too many *ushiojiru* ingredients... so Taisho boiled them with tomatoes to make something new.”

“I see. This is a great solution. There is a similar dish in the region of my home, but saffron was also added to that one.”

“Saffron, you say?”

Leontaine guessed that Helmina did not know about the existence of saffron from her blank face. It was understandable. The continent south, and its north. Even though the soup was cooked with the same fish, the ingredients and tastes were different.

“Ah. Also, I did not expect you to put squid in it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do you dislike squid?”

“No, it’s my favourite.”

Leontaine had an inseparable bond with squid.

“I... am a squid fisherman’s daughter, but my husband couldn’t eat squid until he got married to me.”

“He~eh, that guy is also a difficult one, huh.”

A squid fisherman’s daughter would mean that she came from a port town. He might be a good-for-nothing man to purposely marry her and make her work in a pub. If it was a good daughter like her, she could have easily found a good family to be married into.

If she had came across Helmina when Helmina was still single and looking for a partner, she probably could have set Helmina up with a trustworthy man. When she thought about that, Leontaine chuckled to herself. Instead of worrying for the other party, she should worry about herself first. She was in a strange mood while she was eating the bouillabaisse.

Would she prepare boiled rockfish with tomatoes for her husband if she got married? Even though the land was too barren for farming, the seafood around Leontaine’s inherited territory was delicious. Since the tax was half monetary and half goods, you could eat all the seafood you wanted there. Although she started her mercenary job because she was fed up with endless fish dishes everyday, she became homesick when she was away.

“Customer-san, are you a mercenary?”

“Ah, that’s right. I am a mercenary. I was found out, huh.”

“That’s because only mercenaries carry armor chests.”

“That’s true.”

She should have found an inn and left the chest there first, but she was very hungry today. Even though the inns served meals, their main priority was to sate her hunger, and the taste was secondary.

“Actually, I am searching for a person.”

“A person, you say?”

“Ah, yes. That’s why I came to the Old Capital.”

The signs of war had passed in the north. She should have returned to the Eastern Kingdom once she received her pay.

Still, she had turned towards the Old Capital since she had a lingering attachment to it.

“If mercenary-san wants to find a person, I have a few connections. Perhaps, I might be able to help.”

“He~eh, connections, huh. That’s reassuring. I would be so grateful if you helped me.”

“Is that person something like a benefactor or an old friend of sorts?”

“No, it’s a little different.”

Leontaine noticed that she had started talking without realizing.

She thought she had already discarded her femininity a long time ago, but from the bittersweet feeling swelling in her chest, it seemed that some still remained.

“The person I’m searching for... is someone similar to a lover.”

Chapter 39

The Female Mercenary (Part 2)

It was supposed to be an unremarkable battle.

The battlefield was hazy, and it was drizzling. The army on the other side of the field was half the size of the Eastern Army that Leontaine was a part of.

It was an exaggeration to call it an army.

The feudal lord had scattered some coins, which drew in about 200 mercenaries. The Western Army only had about 100 troops, with a few stragglers.

If it was a battle between mercenaries, the side with the most numbers would win, unless something extraordinary happened. It was simple mathematics that even a child could understand.

The ground was muddy from the rain, with the mud reaching up to one's ankles.

It had started out as a quarrel between serfs. They were arguing over whether or not one serf's farmland intruded into the other's, and when blood was shed, their employers became involved, and then the feudal lords, until even the feudal lord's supporters also joined in the conflict.

In the first place, neither the commanding nobles nor mercenaries were motivated. They just had to clash half-heartedly and determine a winner, which would then settle the matter. The mercenaries would welcome any battle, as long as they got paid.

People congregated in the places where it would be unlikely to clash with an opponent, in order to avoid unnecessary injuries.

Leontaine herself had also only intended to fight halfheartedly.

On the other side, there was a [Demon].

The [Demon]'s strategy was to launch a surprise attack to defeat them in one fell swoop by using his employer, [Horseface] Ferdinand, who had a weak fighting spirit, as a decoy. The [Demon] and his company detoured around the forest through the shrubbery, and charged in, breaking through the Eastern Army's weak flank.

As Leontaine started to retell her battle, the customers in the pub gathered around,

with mugs in hand. They had been starving for these kinds of stories. A live story like this was unexpectedly well received.

Someone passed around a small plate, without any bad intentions, to gather change for drinks or snacks.

Even though Leontaine was now a mercenary, she was originally a lower class noble's daughter. During her education, she had grown fond of poetry.

Even though she wasn't as good as a genuine minstrel, she became fired up once people started becoming interested.

It was a pleasant feeling to see even the dishwasher girl timidly appearing from behind the counter to listen to her story.

Leontaine moistened her mouth with a second glass of 'Toriazusu Nama' and continued her story.

The strength of the [Demon], who charged ahead, was overwhelming. The four people in front of him were reduced to two, and from two to one, as a result of his ambush.

The reason was his equipment.

Although it was a melee, the [Demon] was only wearing minimal armour.

Armor would definitely be a hindrance in the current situation, where the ground was marsh-like.

However, people normally wouldn't dare to throw their armour away.

In a battlefield where a single blow could mean death, the [Demon] certainly stood out from the rest, with his superb handling of the flow of battle.

He had just one goal, the general's head.

The [Demon] broke through the Eastern Army's formation, like a black kite aiming for its prey

"That's amazing..."

Helmina muttered while leaking out words of admiration.

She was standing still while carrying a mug, engrossed with the story.

"Yeah. I have stood on the battlefield for quite a while now, but for the first time in my life, I got goosebumps, just by looking at the [Demon]."

"Then, did Leontaine-san fight against that [Demon] too?"

“Yeah, I fought against him too.”

She should have been positioned in a location where the enemy wouldn't approach, but before she knew it, she had ended up on the front lines.

The [Demon] had accurately predicted where he thought the safest place would be.

Leontaine braced herself and brandished her sword.

She was wearing the armour that she had inherited. The squid crest on her helm represented her noble house clan, which boasted about defending the coastal sea area for many generations.

“Eh, Leontaine's helmet is decorated with a squid crest?”

“What's the problem, Helmina? I'm nearly at the good part. That's correct, the family crest of my house and the crest on my helm is a squid. Is it strange?”

Even though the continent was wide, Leontaine would be the only mercenary who wore a squid crest on her helm. She intended to raise her voice and laugh at the coming joke, but Helmina looked pale.

On the contrary, she ended up turning her face away in front of the customers.

“Hey, hey, what's wrong? From here on, I will begin the story of the battle between me and the [Demon].”

“By any chance, is the person that Leontaine is pursuing, this [Demon]?”

“You realised it, huh. The moment he realized I was a woman, he went easy on me.”

Leontaine, who did not notice that the veteran war hero [Demon] had pulled his arm away, slashed his left arm.

Even though he was safe because he defended with his gauntlet, there might still be some aftereffects.

“I... wanted to say a few words of thanks to him for that time. That's why I have been searching for the [Demon] all this time.”

“Leontaine-san, do you know the [Demon]'s name?”

“Sadly, I don't know that. The entire battlefield was in disarray. However, I would recognise him if I meet him. That's all I am confident about.”

“Is... that so?”

“What? Why? Why did you suddenly start tearing up?”

The storekeeper who had been silently cooking till now answered Leontaine’s question.

“It’s like this. The [Demon] who appeared in your story is very similar to one of our store’s regulars.”

“I-is that true?”

It was a big step forward. Until now, she had been continuously searching aimlessly before coming here.

Perhaps she could meet the regular of this store if she came tonight.

“Ah, what should I do?! I’m happy, and nervous... but it doesn’t mean I’m not ready to meet him... what should I do, Helmina?!”

“Leontaine-san, please calm down. We’re not sure yet.”

“No, I have a good feeling about this. I would be able to meet him here tonight. I’m sure of this lead. When we meet, I’d like to thank him first. And then, and then... Ah! What should I do?!”

“Please calm down. My husband should be coming soon.”

The world froze at Helmina’s words, and Leontaine fell silent.

“...Husband? What does Helmina’s husband have anything to do with this?”

Leontaine, who wasn’t aware of the circumstances, put some strength into her words, so Helmina put on a resigned expression and answered.

“The [Demon] that Leontaine-san is searching for, might be... my husband.”

Chapter 40

The Female Mercenary (Part 3)

The store's interior fell so silent, one could hear a pin drop.

Leontaine felt everyone's eyes gather on her.

Gazes of pity, sympathy, and even curiosity.

Although there were various expressions directed at her, the feeling coming from Leontaine's chest wasn't one of a broken heart.

"Ahahaha!"

"Leontaine... -san?"

Helmina worriedly looked at Leontaine, who had suddenly burst out with laughter. She thought that Leontaine's mind had become strange from the shock of having her heart broken.

"No, no. Everything is fine, Helmina. That's perfectly alright. It was a story from many years ago. It's probably been as long as the time between when I was still a small, childish lass and when I had grown up to become an excellent mercenary. It isn't strange for that stupidly strong [Demon] to settle down and start a family."

"Ha, haa..."

"On the contrary, I'm happy. The fact that he didn't end up as a corpse lying on a battlefield somewhere."

Leontaine drank the contents of her mug in one gulp and lifted the empty mug up to the sky.

"This is to commemorate my heartbreak! Today is my treat, so drink up!"

A commotion arose and after that, order after order came in quick succession.

Even though Leontaine thought that a heartbreak commemoration was a strange excuse, she couldn't make noise if she didn't do it that night.

Helmina and the other waitress, as well as the dishwasher girl, were busy taking a rapidly increasing number of orders.

“Leo, Leontaine-san... a-are you really alright?”

Helmina asked anxiously, while carrying three mugs of ‘Toriaezu Nama’ in both hands. The tips of Leontaine’s eyebrows drooped down, as if she was going to burst into tears at any moment.

Leontaine held back her desire to cry out loud, and she slapped Helmina’s back with her palm.

They gave up on taking individual orders. The chef served large plates of appetizers, one after another; the customers would take whichever ones they liked and put them onto their own plate.

There were some dishes among the colourful array that Leontaine had never seen before, but all of them were delicious and went well with alcohol.

When she was staring at the drunken people, who were drinking alcohol together and enjoying the treats without reserve, the sound of the glass door being pulled open abruptly resounded through the store.

“Hey, hey, what’s the commotion about?”

The moment she heard that voice, Leontaine felt her heart throb, like that of a pure maiden.

She couldn’t forget it. That voice, it was the [Demon].

It was the voice of that [Demon] that she had heard in her dreams for many, many years.

When she turned around and looked at the door, she was sure that it was the man standing there.

“A-are you the [Demon]?”

Through the self-control that she had forged on the battlefield, Leontaine managed to keep herself from reflexively running up to him. The [Demon] was confused. It was similar to how he had looked when he was showing Leontaine mercy during that battle.

“Err, you are...?”

The other party did not recognise Leontaine. It was to be expected. It would be impossible to remember an opponent who had crossed blades with him on that battlefield so many years ago.

“By any chance, are you the mercenary with that squid helm?”

Throb.

Her heart throbbed again. It shouldn't have been possible. He shouldn't have remembered her.

She remembered the battle as if had happened yesterday, but it was supposed to just be a common battlefield for him.

“It's you, after all. Judging by your physique, I'm not mistaken.”

“Y-you remembered...?”

It was impossible.

She had crossed many other battlefields since then, but she had never encountered him again.

How strange of a coincidence was it for the [Demon] to still remember her?

The [Demon] scratched his left arm with his index finger and gave an awkward smile.

“That's because it's rare for a woman to be a mercenary.”

Leontaine couldn't see his face properly when he said those words, since he hurriedly picked up a bowl of ushiojiru and drank it to hide his face.

The saltiness of the soup was comforting for a worn-out body.

“[Demon], it is my treat today. You should drink with your wife.”

“Is that alright, [Squid Helm]?”

“I don't mind. I'm doing quite well now.”

Leontaine had secretly made a decision when she saw the [Demon]'s smiling face.

Tomorrow, she would leave the Old Capital. If she saw this smile one more time, she might not be able to give it up again.

The [Demon] currently had a wonderful wife named Helmina.

She would leave this town before her regrets deepened.

However, tonight, just for tonight, she wanted to continue liking the [Demon].
When she thought about that while drinking the ushiojiru, she felt that the soup tasted a little too salty.



Chapter 41

The Mackerel Pike of the Old Capital (Part 1)

Eleanora looked at her desk, which was messy as usual, and heaved a small sigh. It was already dark outside by the time she finished her work, and today's fatigue was weighing down on her shoulders.

There were bundles of parchment paper, her familiar quill pen, and a bottle of ink on the big wooden desk, which had been cut from a piece of the gigantic Mongolian Oak.

Even though everything was of high quality, she did not particularly seek extravagance. Since she used a desk a lot at work, it would actually be more expensive to replace or repair a cheaper desk. As the Guild Master of one of the three Water Transportation Guilds in the Old Capital, she had many things to handle.

For example, this pile of letters.

It was due to the Guild's deep connections with the Eastern Kingdom and the Northern Three Territories that they had risen to this point, so having a letter written by the Guild Master, Eleonora herself, was a powerful weapon and a lifeline at the same time.

Due to her bewitching aura that went hand in hand with her beautiful looks, there were rumours that Eleonora left all her work to her subordinates. It was a serious misunderstanding of her, but she believed that she knew the origin of the rumours.

Due to her mother's negligent management of the business, Eleonora had to write dozens of letters every day, and fingers became callused.

This guild had been succeeded matrilineally every generation, and its rapid expansion was also due to her mother's influence.

She had pulled skilled members from Reinhold's collapsing guild, and they had become the second most powerful guild in the Old Capital in one fell swoop.

Everything was thanks to her womanly charm.

Eleonora's mother, whom even her daughter recognized as extremely beautiful, knew the value of one's own beauty better than anyone else.

If the expansion of the guild relied on a woman's charm, then maintaining the guild was also dependent on it.

That was how Eleonora grew up to be a misandrist.
However, she didn't intend to let anybody know that.
Even though she was seen as an amorous woman who seduced men, she could count the number of men who had held her hands before on one hand.

Besides being beautiful, she had a relatively high-level of curiosity.
This was due to not wanting to lose to her mother as a woman. Although she was more beautiful than her mother, she did not want to use her beauty in the same way. That was Eleonora's principles on beauty.
However that was all.
She worked during the day and during her free time.
Recently however, Eleonora had found a secret pleasure.

"Welcome!"

"...elcome"

Eleonora returned the usual warm greetings with a small nod and sat down at one of the seats by the counter without hesitation.

She received a warm, wet towel from Shinobu with her weary hands and couldn't help but enjoy the feeling.

Eleonora looked at the menu while enjoying the sensation of blood flowing through every nook and cranny of her stiff hands.

The lager of this store was certainly delicious, but recently, Eleonora preferred to order *reishu* exclusively.

It was her clever tactic to wash down the delicious dishes and her occupational sorrow at the same time with cool, clear sake.

(TL note: *reishu* = cold sake)

"I will have this Dewazakura today. And then, some delicious fish."

(TL: Dewazakura: a sake brewing company brand)

"Do you want it grilled? Or do you want it stewed?"

"Oh, right... then, I want it grilled."

Shinobu, who was serving an *otoshi* of *kinpira gobou*, conveyed the orders and brought out a beautiful glass immediately. Unlike the 'Toriaezu Nama', which was served after it was filled, the *reishu* was poured from the bottle, in front of the guest.

It was a refreshing sight to see the clear *reishu* fill up the glass with a ‘glug-glug’ sound, and she welled up with joy marvelling at it.

(TL note: *kinpira gobou* = braised burdock root and carrots in a sweet and salty sauce)



Her first order of business was to wet her mouth with a sip of the Dewazakura. She enjoyed the aroma. While she was enjoying the refined taste of the liquor, she brought her chopsticks to the *kinpara gobou*.

It had a crunchy texture, and a tingling spiciness that intensified the flavours. Then she brought the cup to her mouth again. The taste of the soy sauce from the *kinpira gobou* was washed down, leaving only a refreshing aftertaste in her mouth.

At first, Eleonora had eaten with a knife and fork, but since she realized that eating that way wasn't considered “elegant” in the store, she started using chopsticks.

In the store, the usual sentries were drinking lager with tempura, while seemingly having a serious talk.

The area around the Old Capital was very peaceful after settling the problem concerning the Northern Three Territories.

It seemed that they were telling a story about a witch, but Eleonora had no inkling on

what it was about at all.

Eleonora did not have a good impression of the duo, especially the one growing a moustache, Nikolaus. He had an aura similar to that of a womanizer about him.

This did not mean that he was an enemy of women. Rather, she felt that they treated women as beings who needed to be treated gently.

However, it may have also been due to Eleonora's fear of her true nature being seen through. She believed that he would be difficult to deal with.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Eleonora-san. This is *sanma*."

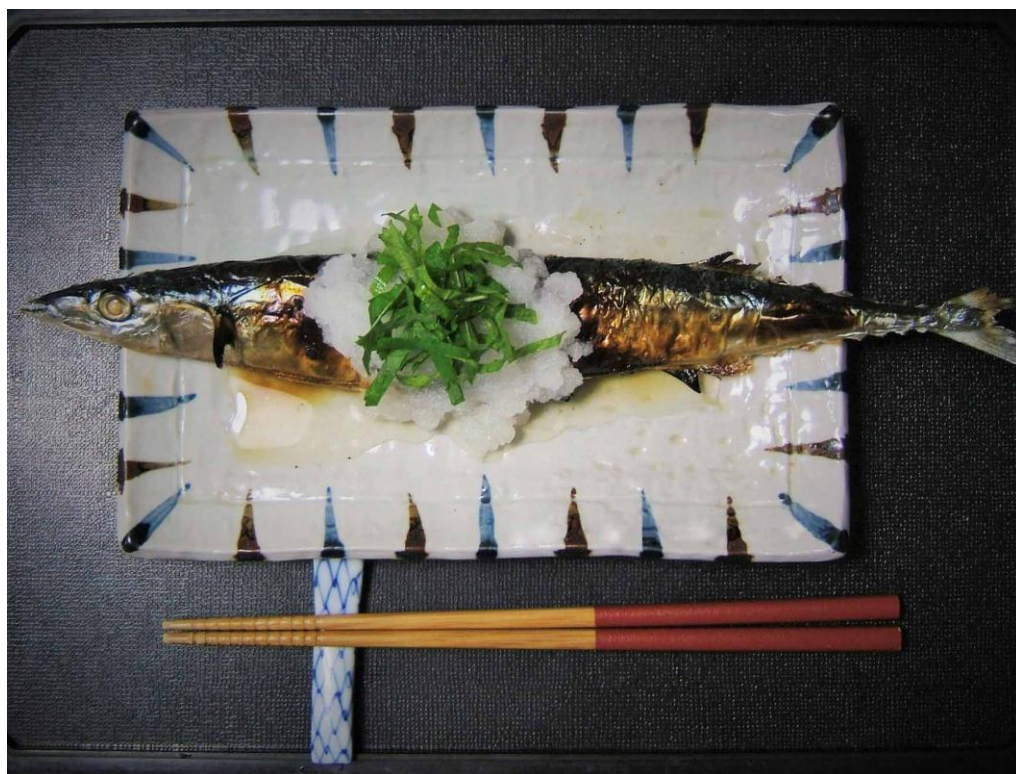
(TL note: *sanma*: mackerel pike fish)

"*Sanma*, you say?"

Shinobu was carrying a slender and long fish grilled with salt.

It looked like a sand lance fish, but the body was slightly thicker than that.

The fatty body looked perfectly grilled, and the fragrant smell tickled her nose.



"It's the first catch of the season. This year's mackerel pikes are very fatty and delicious, you know."

"It seems to pair well with *reishu*, doesn't it?"

Eleonora, who was nodding along to Shinobu's words, was already eyeing the delicious-looking mackerel pike.

She gulped while looking at the dish, which had been served on a rectangular plate and had soy sauce dripping from it, with white grated daikon piled on top of it.

When she brought her chopsticks to it, the skin gave way with a crispy sound, and the flesh inside was revealed.

She impatiently tore off a piece of flesh, and then carefully brought it to her mouth.

Delicious. It was delicious.

The forceful flavour of fish oozed into her mouth with the oils as she chewed on the fat.

Finally, she washed it down with Dewazakura.

It was irresistible.

Next, she took another bite with the grated daikon on top.

The refreshing taste of the grated daikon gently washing away the taste of the oils was truly a work of art.

Something that was reddish brown appeared from inside the white flesh.

Were those the mackerel pike's internal organs? She became uneasy for an instant, but it was impossible for Izakaya Nobu to cut corners. The fact that it was here meant that it could be eaten.

Eleonora timidly extended her chopsticks towards it while thinking so.

She ate it in one bite.

Bitter.

She drank the Dewazakura by reflex.

At that moment, something strange happened.

It was still bitter, but it became delicious.

Even though Eleonora had not particularly liked bitter things ever since she was a child, she could eat this mackerel pike's internal organs. In fact, wasn't it pairing well with the *reishu*?

The refined taste of *reishu*, and the mackerel pike's innards.

Eleonora was captivated by the strange harmony between them.

"Does the mackerel pike's *wata* suit your taste?"

(TL note: *wata*: guts)

Shinobu handed Eleonora another wet towel to wipe her greasy hands off on.

“The innards of a mackerel pike... are called *wata*?”

“Yes. We remove them from other types of fishes, as only the mackerel pike’s is delicious when eaten. It goes well with cold sake, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, this is very tasty.”

It looked unattractive, and tasted bitter.

The bitterness complemented the taste of the cold sake really well.

Eleonora, who was filled with wonder at this discovery, held the chopsticks on the mackerel pike.

It was a delicious fish, but it was difficult to eat.

She had poked at in various ways, making the mackerel pike become a disfigured lump of meat on the plate.

There was only a little *reishu* left too. Just when she wanted to order another dish, someone called out to Eleonora from behind.

“Ah, that’s so wasteful. There is still a bit more that you can eat.”

Chapter 42

The Mackerel Pike of the Old Capital (Part 2)

The person who had looked at the plate of mackerel pike and said that was one of the sentry guard pair, the one with the moustache. If she remembered correctly, his name was Nikolaus.

“There are still a lot of parts that you can eat.”

His face drew near.

He was probably drunk. His breath reeked of alcohol, and the smell drifted through the air. His face was flushed red, and was now beside Eleonora’s.

How long had it been since a younger man had gotten this close?

While looking at the moustache growing on his chin, Eleonora suddenly recalled her past.

Father also had a similar moustache.

It wasn’t the ‘father’ nominated by the church. It was her biological father, who was related to her by blood. Even if she said so, she didn’t hear it from her mother directly. It was probably a woman’s intuition. She had only seen him once, but she understood that he was where half of her body originated from.

Among the men who were interested in her mother, he could not be considered attractive.

He was not particularly special or notable. To be honest, she couldn’t even picture his face clearly. She only remembered that he had an ordinary looking face.

That man’s hobby was to annoy her mother, but for some reason, he was not treated harshly. That might have been how a twisted couple would act.

“Bu~t, I cannot pluck out anymore. That’s the reason it became like this.”

“It’s alright, it can still be eaten.”

The shabby leftovers of what used to be a mackerel pike lay on the plate.

Nikolaus took a pair of disposable wooden chopsticks from the chopstick stand, while

ignoring the protests made by the sulking Eleonora.

He broke the mackerel pike's body into smaller pieces in one smooth movement, without hesitation.

"It's beautiful," Eleonora thought, even though it was just Nikolaus handling the chopsticks.

He pinched the mackerel pike's head and completely removed the spine with his deft hands. Meat magically appeared, even though Eleonora had thought that there wasn't any more flesh to pluck off.

After a while, a portion of meat lay separated from the mackerel pike's spine, which was still attached to its head and tail.

"Taisho, can you make that from the other day?"

"Ah, the mackerel pike rice, huh."

Taisho received the plate of mackerel pike meat from Nikolaus and tossed some cooked rice into a pan.

He added some seasonings into the soup, which Shinobu and the rest called dashi, and added that into the pan as well. Then, he added the mackerel pike's meat and cooked it together.

Eleonora, who didn't cook much, thought that the end product would taste similar to barley porridge. Contrary to what she expected, although the rice soaked up the dashi, it was still plump and fluffy.

It looked somewhat like the eel bento.

Even though there was a difference between dashi and tare, they were still similar in the sense that they combined both rice and fish.

She knew quite a bit about the eel bento because she had sent messengers to buy them secretly, as she had heard from Shinobu that it was good for the skin.

However, the mackerel pike rice looked different.

To be honest, it didn't look good.

Even though there were green spring onions scattered on top, it looked like leftover food and did not appeal to Eleonora's aesthetic sense.

However, what was that appetizing fragrance?

The pieces of flesh that Nikolaus had plucked out were properly mixed with the rice,

and an unknown fragrance drifted over the counter.
When it was served to her, the fragrance became even more prominent.

“I don’t eat many beautiful dishes, but it’s delicious, you know.”

Nikolaus recommended it while laughing heartily, and Eleonora brought her chopsticks to the mackerel pike rice.

The rice, packed with the mackerel pike’s flavours, crumbled in her mouth.

It was easy to eat.

The mackerel pike’s strong taste was delicious enough to be taken with sake, but Eleonora, who was not used to eating it, felt that the flavour was a little too rich.

Then, how about this mackerel pike rice?

The ginger (inguva) used had been effective, because the simmered blue-backed fish did not have any stench.

The spring onion not only gave some colour to it, but also changed the texture. Pickled eggplants were also added as garnish, which served as a good palate cleanser.

Even though it looked so unattractive, why was it so delicious?

Furthermore, this delicious taste was not luxurious. Instead, it was a somewhat nostalgic, calming flavour.

She wanted to savour it forever. While she was thinking such thoughts, the bowl had already been emptied.

The amount was also just right. If it was too much, her stomach would feel heavy; if it was too little, she would have needed to order another item.

For some reason, Eleonora thought about her real father while looking at the empty bowl.

“Hey, it’s surprisingly delicious even with such an appearance, right?”

“Yeah, it really is.”

It was really delicious.

Eleonora, who had summoned chefs from the Capital and had indulged in all kinds of gourmet food, couldn’t believe that her heart was moved by a dish with such an appearance.

This was why she wouldn’t stop frequenting Izakaya Nobu, no matter what her subordinates said.

“Young lady, because you are a beautiful lady, I will tell you another delicious dish.”

Eleonora finally realised from Nikolaus’s words.

This man was drunk. He probably did not even notice that the person whom he was speaking to right now was Eleonora, the Master of the Water Transportation Guild. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for her to be addressed in such a familiar manner.

She understood, but for some reason, she still felt a little lonely.

She wondered if she would meet this man, who sported an unattractive moustache, again next time.

“Thank you, Casanova-san. Let’s meet again if there’s a chance next time.”

Eleonora thanked the lady-killer sentry guard politely, whom she had superimposed her father’s image over for an instant, and took out her purse.

Even including the tip, the amount of silver coins she paid Shinobu was ten times the required amount.

Eleonora nodded quietly at the perplexed Shinobu, who was counting the coins.

Izakaya Nobu’s poster girl seemed to understand and stored the silver coins in the cashbox.

Would the moustached guard come to this pub again tomorrow?

While wishing for it, Eleonora began to slowly walk back home under the moonlight.

Chapter 43

Takowasa (Part 1)

“Another glass of ‘Toriaezu Nama’ please! Nevermind, this is troublesome. Please bring two glasses instead!”

Godhardt ordered a lager enthusiastically, then rubbed his palms together while facing the appetizer in front of him.

Today’s order was an unagi zukushi.

There was eel kabayaki, eel shirayaki, umaki and kimosui.

(TL note: unagi zukushi = all eel meal; kimosui = eel liver soup)

~From top left clockwise: Kabayaki, Shirayaki, Kimosui, Umaki~

The eel craze had settled down in Izakaya Nobu recently, instead food carts with eel gyosho yaki on the menu had started to become popular.

Even though his subordinates loved it, Godhardt felt that it still had a long way to go. Nevertheless, since various stores competed to come up with it, so recently they were coming up with foods that could be eaten quickly.

(TL note: eel gyosho yaki = grilled eel with fish sauce)

In the end, no matter who sold eel in the Old Capital, Godhardt would always make a profit.

The fishing rights of the Old Capital currently belonged to Godhardt.

“Since we don’t have to worry about money, we shall feast!”

“Fuu... Haa... Ha...”

The one who cowered in front of his eyes, but was brazenly eating the shirayaki and drinking the atsukan, was unexpectedly, Reinhold.

Like Godhardt, he was also a Master of a Water Transportation Guild, but he had not made any significant profits recently, so his guild was weakening.

Since Godhardt became rich after ripping off Reinhold’s guild and obtaining the fishing rights, it seemed like there had been some shady things going on.

atsukan is hot sake

Godhardt hadn't swindled it from Reinhold, but the value of the fishing rights before and after the exchange had changed greatly.

Nowadays, there was no one in the old Capital who treated eel as a worthless fish. Without Izakaya Nobu, eel would still be a worthless fish that could only be made into edible jelly, but this had changed over time.

While waiting for Shinobu to serve the lager, he brought a piece of umaki to his mouth with a fork.

The flavour of the smooth egg and the eel sauce, blended together in perfect harmony within his mouth.

This. This was eel.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, here are two glasses of 'Nama'."

Just as he was eating the kabayaki, Shinobu brought out the lager at just the right time. This was too good.

Izakaya Nobu's eels were fluffy but still contained a strong flavour.

Could it be the fat accumulated over autumn? Godhardt preferred this over the ones he ate during summer.

"Reinhold-san, this eel is really a delicious dish, huh. I think I could eat this every day if it's like this."

"Godhardt-san, your voice is too loud. There are other customers as well. Also, I think I would get tired of it if I ate it every day."

After being told that there were other customers around, he looked around and saw that there were a lot of customers in Izakaya Nobu today. Among the faces, he recognised the sentry guard pair, the deacon, and the tax collector with a monocle.

Gernot was also eating Napolitan today. There were also a few unknown faces here and there.

There was one who looked so large, it seemed like he was going to burst.

The girl in charge of the dishes, Eva, and the young wife of the Company Commander also worked here.

"This is a big deal. It has not even been a year since this store opened for business, Reinhold-san."

“That means that the customers think well of it. It is very important for a restaurant, you know.”

“It is that way for the Water Transportation Guild too.”

The reason why Godhardt was able to speak on such familiar terms with Reinhold now wasn't because of the big difference in the sizes of their guilds, due to the matter of the fishing rights.

Reinhold, who judged that it wasn't possible to conduct business by himself alone, had recently started working as Godhardt's subcontractor.

Even if both were from Water Transportation Guilds, they had their own respective expertise.

As the oldest Water Transportation Guild in the Old Capital, the technological strength of the remaining guild members under Reinhold was high.

With Reinhold's cooperation, they could undertake a whole new level of work that would not have been possible previously.

Since they began working as a team, it had come to a point where their reputation to their main clients, who were ship owners and companies, had become better, so Godhardt had been in a good mood recently.

“Reinhold-san, we had various issues in the past, but I'm glad we are working well together now. I would be grateful if you let bygones be bygones.”

“It's the same with me. Ever since Godhardt-san sent jobs to me, I have finally been able to take a breather. Once again, thank you very much.”

After making a toast with their glasses and sake cups, they downed their liquor in one go.

Delicious liquor taken together with delicious appetizers.

There was nothing happier than this for a body that was fatigued from work.

“So, Reinhold-san, I heard that you had something serious to discuss with me today.”

“Yeah, that's right. Well then, I'll tell you the story soon.”

Even though Godhardt did not know of the contents of the talk, he understood that it was business related.

He figured that it would be about the business arrangements that Reinhold had made

with the fishing village in the north previously.

Reinhold had a feeling that Godhardt would agree to almost anything today.

However on the contrary, he wanted to stop it if it became a ridiculous gamble.

Reinhold, who had succeeded the Water Transportation Guild from his father, believed that he was still young and wanted to become successful in one shot, but he couldn't deny the fact that he lacked experience.

Before his mind became dulled by becoming drunk, Reinhold wanted Godhardt to listen to this youngster's idea first.

"As you know, Godhardt-san, our guild can only maintain the water transportation on the scale of the Old Capital, and that is our limit."

"That's true. There's Eleonora's part as well."

The three guilds had been able to coexist until now, but there were some circumstances as to why each guild had only employed a few labourers.

As a matter of fact, the second and third sons from the surrounding rural areas had come to the old Capital in droves recently, so it felt like the number of labourers had slightly increased. Naturally, the Water Transportation Guild, that operated a business, had interests in this area, but conflicts had appeared.

"Therefore, I'm thinking of starting a new business."

"New business? That's brave."

"Since my guild is the smallest, I can say this casually."

Even so, Reinhold's guild was the oldest, and had some history as well. It was a shameful way of thinking to just declare that they were the smallest guild so casually. However, Godhardt wasn't that insensitive to point that out. It was Reinhold who had to make a decision about his troubles. There was also the feeling of wanting to support him.

"The Eisen Schmidt Company, that deals with grain trading, seems to have opened up the market in the North recently."

"Yeah, have you begun handling Joosten wheat? Since Bachschouf was gone, I heard that there are many profitable opportunities appearing."

The Bachschouf company that tried to make Izakaya Nobu theirs was dissolved on suspicions of lager smuggling. The aftermath of that incident was still felt in various places.

“This talk is about getting involved in that market.”

“Getting involved, huh. Briefly speaking, I think it’s difficult.”

“Yeah, I would have my company purchase their special products, which haven’t had any exposure in the Old Capital so far.”

“Are you saying you want me to lend you capital?”

Indeed, that sounded reasonable.

The dealings themselves were the company’s domain, but Reinhold would have a share in this in the form of financial investment there.

It was a small gamble to borrow some funds from Godhardt’s guild, but there was also the debt of gratitude.

“I feel really guilty, but would you please lend it to me?”

“I can’t really say an amount or a time interval, since we’re here. However, I think this is an interesting discussion.”

That was all Godhardt could say for now. However, there was one, no, two things that bothered him.

“Well, Reinhold-san. I have two things I want to ask.”

“What is it?”

Reinhold replied with a serious expression.

“First, why did you plan to deal with the Eisen Schmidt Company? And second... that thing under the counter, that strange pot that is moving from time to time. What is that?”

It was difficult to ask, as Reinhold had come earlier, but there was a strange pot

underneath his seat, and it had been moving slightly all the time.

“I can answer both of your questions at the same time.”

Reinhold lifted the pot from the floor and removed the lid slowly.
The smell of the sea drifted through the air.

“This is the special product that will carry our guilds’ futures on its shoulders... an octopus.”

Chapter 44

Takowasa (Part 2)

“He-hey, Reinhold-san. Isn’t that...”

That slippery ‘thing’ crawled out of the open pot.

The weird creature, which was covered in slimy mucus and slowly crept across the floor, seemed to still be very much alive.

Godhardt had never seen this creature called an ‘octopus’ before.

If it were a squid, he would recognize it.

If one said they did not know what a squid was in Izakaya Nobu, they were very unqualified.

The [Demon] Berthold, the company commander of the sentry corps that was in charge of the defense of the Old Capital, had a former fear of squid.

The octopus was a creature similar to that, so it could probably be eaten too.

The interior of the store suddenly became noisy, due to the unexpected appearance of the rare ‘guest’.

Some of the customers were even shouting to get rid of it.

Even Gernot, who usually boasted of having a calm and collected disposition in the council, only looked calm, while taking refuge at the corner of the wall with his Napolitan dish.

The only ones who remained calm were Shinobu, Taisho, Eva, and the young wife of the company commander, who was called Helmina, if he wasn’t mistaken.

The women were tough at such times.

Meanwhile, Helmina expertly caught the octopus and shoved it back into the jar.

During this commotion, it seemed that the pair of sentry guards were stunned and couldn’t do anything. Could they really protect the town like this?

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think it was still so lively.”

Reinhold scratched his head apologetically.

While the customers got a hold of themselves and jeers were thrown around,

Godhardt was observing Taisho's facial expressions.

Those were the eyes of a chef.

Godhardt wanted to make sure that the octopus was marketable.

If Reinhold's octopus was anything like a squid and could be eaten, it would be a huge advantage if they could transport them fresh to the Old Capital.

It wasn't like you couldn't eat it after it died and some time had passed, but if you could transport it alive, it would be a different story. Wasn't it better if the state of freshness could be preserved?

'Perhaps.' Godhardt turned towards Reinhold.

Even though he thought Reinhold was a well raised young master, this man might have brought the octopus here on purpose.

If that was the case, then he was unexpectedly shrewd.

If he thought about it, what was Godhardt doing when he was Reinhold's age?

Didn't he do nothing but picking fights everyday?

"Ugh."

"What's the matter, Godhardt-san? Groaning like that. Your precious eel is getting cold."

"Eh, ah, that's right."

Shinobu casually exchanged the lagers, which had become lukewarm after the commotion. Such consideration for the customers was hard to come by in other restaurants.

While he was gulping down the new lager, Reinhold was talking about giving the octopus to Taisho.

"How about it? This octopus. I'll hand it over to you, so won't you try cooking it? Of course, I won't charge you for taking it."

"I'm thankful for that, but it'll take some time."

"I don't mind. The night is still young."

The surrounding guests seemed to have taken an interest in the conversation between

the two, and there were signs that they were pricking their ears up to listen. Everyone intended to take part in sampling the leftovers. Taisho decided to cook the octopus, preparing it with deft movements. The octopus was quickly prepped in front of their eyes, while Shinobu was grating daikon.

“I only need to rub it with salt actually, but this octopus seems firm, so I will rub this grated daikon on it too.”

Shinobu usually served the tables, but she also grated the daikon skillfully. The bowl was filled up with grated daikon in the blink of an eye. The customers gulped in anticipation. There would never be a time when it would be as wasteful as leaving now. Apparently, it was possible to eat octopus in various ways, so they had ordered lager and prepared for a drawn-out wait.

Eva, who was wiping the floor where the octopus had crawled, also rushed about, taking orders in a flurry. Helmina was filling ordinary beer mugs with lager, and had been carrying them from one table to another. Also, since Taisho’s hands were full, no appetizers were refilled. In that case, every seat seemed to be talking about the flowers blossoming. There was a topic about a witch or something similar that had come up at a table, but Reinhold and Godhardt concerned about something else.

“This year’s harvest festival seems to be smaller than usual.”

“That’s because the Bachschouf company has shut down, and there seems to have been a dispute in the management of the Grand Bazaar.”

“It was preferable when compared to having most of the profits taken away, huh.”

Even though there were several months till the harvest festival, the preparation for it would begin soon. It was important for the Water Transportation Guild to allocate tasks between the opening of the Grand Bazaar and the harvest festival, which was held at the same time.

Merchants from all over the Empire gathered at the Grand Bazaar, which was held only once a year. Even though the profits earned was huge, it wasn’t trouble-free. During that time, the reputation of the Water Transportation Guild was at stake, in

case there was any carelessness during the transportation of goods.

“The preparation for the octopus and the Grand Bazaar is essential, is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s right. Once Eleonora is together with us, the three of us should have a proper briefing.”

“I see. So, where is this meeting?”

Reinhold awkwardly asked an unnecessary question. The answer was understood when Godhardt saw him smiling.

“I’ve decided for it to be in this store.”

While they were talking about it, the preparation of the octopus seemed to have finally ended.

Taisho, who prepared the octopus with his splendid kitchen knife, was washing the now thinly sliced octopus with water.

“First up, it’s sashimi.”

~Octopus sashimi~

The sashimi was beautifully arranged on the plate like white petals.

When it was crawling on the floor, it looked like the minion of an evil god sleeping in the depths of the sea, but strangely it now looked very appetizing.

He picked up a slice, dipped it in soy sauce, and brought it to his mouth.

“Oh...?”

His voice leaked out unintentionally at the chewy texture in his mouth.

It was firm when he chewed on it.

Even though he had eaten fish sashimi several times before, this one had a different taste.

“This is softer than the time I ate it in the northern town...”

Reinhold picked up two, no three slices of sashimi while saying so.

Not wanting to lose, Godhardt also extended his chopsticks, unexpectedly enjoying the

firmness of the octopus.

This dish would pair well with cold sake.

“Excuse me, Shinobu-chan. A glass of cold sake here please.”

“Ah, me too please.”

The orders for cold sake came pouring in after one person asked for it.

Gernot, who was suspected of suffering from a strange illness of only being able to eat Napolitan, was stealthily holding a glass of white wine in one hand.

It matched well.

As expected, the octopus sashimi and the cold sake pair well together.

The cold, dry taste of the cold sake enhanced the umami flavour of the octopus by several times.

The octopus was indeed an ingredient suitable for sashimi.

Although there was no tradition of eating raw fresh fish in the Old Capital, it would be a different story if they could purchase live octopus from the northern port city.

A considerable profit might come out of this.

The sashimi had been cleared in the blink of an eye, but the next dish was served as if it had been waiting for this time.

“Next is octopus karaage.”

~Tako karaage~



The tentacles, which were cut into chunks, had been deep fried and even had a strong fragrance.

How did the fragrance from the oil cause the stomach to have such violent reactions and set up this kind of temptation?

There should be lager for this.

Godhardt's instinct as a drinker was strongly insisting on it.

"Shinobu-chan, one glass of 'Toriaezu Nama' here!"

"Here please!"

"Here too, please!"

He held a gulp of lager in his mouth, and his taste buds returned to normal.

Octopus karaage.

The chicken karaage was a famous dish of Izakaya Nobu.

So, the octopus was a strong enough contender to be made into karaage, huh?

He contemplated this quietly as he picked up a piece.

Crunch.

He took a bite, and noticed his blunder.

The octopus was not meant to be eaten as sashimi.

It was meant to be eaten as karaage. This creature had been created by God solely for this purpose.

If he thought about it that way, he could accept that monstrous appearance.

That dubious and eerie figure was to hide this delicacy from human beings.

Naturally, it also paired well with lager. It was a little bit more exquisite, as he had been told that it was spiced a little more than the chicken karaage. It could become a habit to eat octopus karaage.

"Is it to your liking?"

Shinobu asked him while carrying a second glass of lager.

Godhardt vigorously nodded to declare so.

"This octopus karaage is wonderful. It also pairs well with 'Toriaezu Nama'. This will be my usual order from tomorrow onwards. Of course, I'll eat eel from time to time, but when I have octopus, I want it to be karaage."

"Did you like it that much?"

“Ah, I am really pleased with it. Somehow, I feel like expressing myself like the poet Krowinkel now.”

“Poet...?”

Shinobu, who didn’t seem to understand what he was referring to, was nudged in the elbow by Reinhold, who had come to the rescue.

“It seems that Godhardt-san has a splendid fondness of poems and tales. That Krowinkel is a bard who only sings songs about cooking. His poems are collected and have been made into a book as well.”

“I see, there are various kinds of people huh.”

The empty mug was pushed towards the admiring Shinobu.

“I don’t look like a learned person, do I? It doesn’t fit the appearance of a Guild Master who only has physical strength. Right, Reinhold-san?”

“Am I lacking in physical strength, I wonder?”

Godhardt embraced Reinhold’s neck and forcibly made a toast with him, displaying his well-developed biceps with the other party’s slender arms.

“Don’t mind it. Even if you have no physical strength, you have still put your guild in order. You’re doing well so far.”

“Ri-right...”

Reinhold gave an unconvinced sigh and sipped his lager while picking up a piece of the karaage when the next plate arrived. It was a small bowl.

There was some kind of stalk garnish, and part of the base was sitting on the plate, small and quietly.

It seemed like it would be better to serve it in a big bowl rather than in a pretentious bowl like this.

“The last dish is takowasa. It is a little spicy, so please eat bit by bit.”

~Takowasa~



'I see.' Godhardt made a small sigh.

The sashimi and karaage built up a mood for the next coming dish, but when it finally came, it was somewhat of a wet blanket.

However, since it was Taisho, he might have some plan.

For example, this dish might make him completely sober up if he took a bite. When he thought about it that way, he felt somewhat thankful.

Taisho said he should eat it little by little, it was probably just something like a warning.

Godhardt daringly picked up a handful of takowasa.

Even though Shinobu saw it and tried to stop him, it was already too late.

He threw it into his mouth immediately.

Pain.

The next moment, a pain that he had never felt before ran from the middle of his forehead to the bridge of his nose.

He washed it down with the lager while closing his eyes involuntarily.

What on Earth was that? Rather than spicy, it was painful.

However, it was by no means an unpleasant sensation.

The remaining takowasa was chewed properly. The chewy texture of the sashimi remained intact, but the invigorating, sharp taste, which was neither salt nor spices, produced an exquisite flavour.

(TL note: yep, it's wasabi. Takowasa = tako (octopus) + wasabi)

"Are, are you okay? Eating that much at once..."

Instead of answering Shinobu and Reinhold, who looked anxious, Godhardt threw another mouthful of takowasa into his mouth. However, it was a proper mouthful this time.

Then, the lager.

Delicious.

It was truly delicious.

"Reinhold-san."

"Y, yes."

He grasped both of Reinhold's hands, who was sitting with his spine straightened.

"I agree to the matter of investment. Let's sell octopuses, so I can eat octopus in the Old Capital at any time."

"Yes!"

Godhardt made another toast to Reinhold, who was nodding strongly.

It felt like it had been a long time since he had drank such delicious alcohol.

Chapter 45

Shinobu's Specially Made Pudding (Part 1)

When the autumn sun had set, the Old Capital was wrapped in darkness. The big and small moons that usually traversed the night sky and shone down from the heavens, couldn't be seen that night. Today was day of the dual new moons. Once in several months, both new moon phases occurred at the same time. When both moons were hidden, the streets by the inns and stables were darker than usual. Only the wind remained unusually strong, and leaves from the trees, which had been planted along the streets for shade, danced along with it.

"On the night of the dual new moons, it will appear..."

Eva muttered while wiping the table.

"Appear? What?"

Eva trembled as she answered Shinobu's question.

"The witch..."

"Witch. A witch??"

Shinobu's expression made it clear that she was not expecting a witch.

It was not a lie. There was a witch.

It was reasonable for Shinobu and Taisho to not know of it, as they had come to the Old Capital from some other place, but there was certainly a witch living in the forest.

"What is the witch like?"

"She lives in the depths of the forest, and performs suspicious curses night after night. She rides a broom through the sky, makes weird potions, kidnaps small children and defies the church."

“It’s almost the same as the witches we know about.”

“Also... she likes alcohol and sweet things.”

“Sweet things?”

A witch who liked alcohol and sweet things. There were stories about a witch who liked sweet things so much that she made a house out of sweets.

“Since she likes alcohol, she may come to this store.”

“Yes. The night of the dual new moons is dangerous.”

Even so, Eva wasn’t able to ask them to close the store.

Certainly, Izakaya Nobu had not had much business today. It was certainly empty. Not one customer had shown up that evening.

One person had stopped by, but it was only the butcher’s apprentice, who was delivering a letter to the wrong address. Izakaya Nobu was still open, but had no customers.

It wasn’t strange, as there was virtually no one on the streets outside.

Only idle lantern bearers could be seen wandering the streets, looking for customers. The only people who would go out during the night of the dual new moons were those who couldn’t help it and had urgent business, or those who were curious.

Even so, there wasn’t enough reason for Taisho and Shinobu to close the store.

It would be pitiful if someone was not be able to find a drinking place when they wanted to drink liquor.

Eva also thought that it was fine.

Within the Old Capital, there was probably only one or two stores with such good intentions.

However, the witch was still scary.

It was alright to take a break like Helmina, but she had come before she noticed.

Unfortunately, it had started drizzling. The autumn rain was cold.

Shinobu sighed, and just as she murmured “No one will come today, as expected.”, there was a slight tap on the glass door.

She thought it was the wind until it happened again.

“Ah, welcome!”

“...elcome.”

The glass door opened to reveal a single female customer.

She was wearing a full black robe and had a hood pulled over her eyes, hiding her face.

It was the witch.

Eva wanted to hide, but she couldn't.

This was a pub, and the other party was a customer.

Besides, it wasn't yet confirmed that the woman was the witch.

Eva stared long and hard at the customer, but could not determine her age.

However, from the beautiful texture of the skin on the fingers under her cuffs, she seemed to be in her mid-twenties

“This is such an eccentric store, to still be opened on such a evening. I'm sorry it's only a single lady here, but I'll bother you all for a bit.”

Her voice was husky, and sounded like that of someone in her 60s.

After dusting off her dripping wet robe, the visitor sat down on a seat at the back.

Since she didn't remove her hood, her expression could not be read.

She ordered ale and a suitable snack, preferably something warm.

This was Shinobu's chance to show what she could do.

For the time being, the customer quenched her thirst with 'Toriaezu Nama' and settled her stomach with the otoshi, while Taisho warmed up the nitsuke.

The otoshi tonight was octopus and cucumber with Essig vinegar dressing. Eva had also tasted a little, and the texture of the octopus was interesting.

The nitsuke tonight was based on makogarei, a rare gem picked by Taisho himself, which he boasted to be delicious if made into sashimi.

He would've done that if it wasn't the day for the dual new moons, but since he realised that there wouldn't be many customers tonight, he had made it into a nitsuke right from the start.

(TL: makogarei = marbled solefish)



~Makogarei Nitsuke~

It was also delicious when boiled in soy sauce.

It was as delicious as the karei that had been served to the previous Emperor when he visited this store.

Shinobu preferred something that was lightly seasoned, but Taisho gradually made the taste stronger after observing the customers' reactions recently. It was said that he had devoted himself day and night to enhance the dashi's taste.

The customer also seemed to like the taste and was eating it with relish, while skillfully separating the meat from the bone with her fork and spoon.

Eva was indirectly observing the figure, when the customer let out a chuckle.

"Dear child, are you afraid of me?"

Eva was flustered and shook her head.

She thought she must apologise somehow, but the words did not come out properly.

"No, it's not... customer-san is not a witch and... I'm not afraid of witches, and, and even if you're a witch, we will show proper hospitality to you here in Izakaya Nobu."

Upon seeing Eva frantically attempt to explain herself, the customer burst into laughter.

“I see, you thought that I was a witch. You’re a sharp one, young lady. If that is the case, it’s understandable to be afraid.”

“Ah, no, uhh...”

Was this customer really a witch?

However, it was true that this customer looked like a witch.

Eva thought that it wasn’t good to walk on the streets in those clothes during the night of the dual new moons. However, maybe it was just this customer’s hobby.

“Even so, this is quite an interesting shop, isn’t it?”

While enjoying the nitsuke, the witch-lookalike looked around the store.

Shinobu responded with a “Thank you very much!”, and the customer looked at Eva and stifled a laugh.

“Well, this young lady and the shop assistant here is certainly interesting, so this store is definitely interesting to say the least. It feels like a lost breath of magic.”

“Oh, magic you say...?”

As expected, even Shinobu looked puzzled when the word ‘Magic’ was thrown out. She might not really be a witch, even with that outfit, but Shinobu felt uneasy when she threw out words like ‘Magic’ like that.

“Yes, magic.”

The customer said, and focused her eyes on the Shinto altar.

They had splurged a bit, as gomoku inari was prepared as an offering on the Shinto shrine today, and to the people of the Old Capital, it was overflowing with an exotic atmosphere.

Why would she say it was magic while looking at the Shinto altar?

Eva had a strange experience with it once, but it was a secret.

(TL note: gomoku inari = 5 different types of sushi wrapped in inari skin)

“Although it’s magic, it is good magic. I do not know where it is connected to, but there’s a netting that only allows necessary people to pass through properly.”

“Eh, it’s connected, you say?”



~Gomoku Inari~

Shinobu and Taisho looked at each other.

Eva had not said anything about the backdoor connection leading to a strange place. Of course, Shinobu and Taisho most likely knew about it, but how was this customer able to guess it correctly?

Only certain people could pass through it.

Now that she thought about it, Eva certainly did not see anyone coming in through the backdoor. It was strange enough if she thought about it, but was that called magic too?

“There used to be more ‘doors’ around here in the past. Have you seen mushrooms growing in a beautiful circle in the forest? Have you hidden your precious things in the hollow of a tree, only to find it missing the next day? Or maybe you’ve seen someone you passed by on a street walk into a dead-end alley and not appeared out of it?”

“All of that is magic, you say...?”

When Eva asked that, the customer laughed again.

“It’s possible that it’s magic, and it’s also possible that it isn’t.”

Eva’s knees couldn’t stop trembling.

Shinobu, who was holding a tray in front of her chest with both hands, was lost in thought.

Only Taisho looked like he was waiting for the customer to continue, with sparkling eyes. He was probably interested in magic.

“For example, this nitsuke. I have lived in this neighbourhood for a long time, but this taste is a first for me. Where in the world did you bring this fish and the seasonings from?”

This customer... was she really a witch?

Even Eva understood that it would be terrible if the secret of the backdoor of this store was leaked to someone.

In the worst case scenario, Izakaya Nobu would disappear.

There was no way that Baschouf was the only greedy person around.

Shinobu and Taisho also wouldn't wish for such a thing.

Then, how did this customer know about it?

Just as the customer took another sip of the 'Toriaezu Nama' and was about to say something, the glass door was quietly tapped once more.

Chapter 46

Shinobu's Specially Made Pudding (Part 2)

"My master... didn't bother all of you, did she?"

Unexpectedly, it was a girl who appeared.

She was roughly the same age as Eva.

She had ruffled, light brown hair that was forcibly stuffed underneath her red hood, as well as adorable freckles on her face.

"Oh, it's just Camilla. Did you come to pick me up?"

As soon as she saw the girl's face, the witch look-a-like customer's voice softened. She beckoned the girl over and removed her hood before combing her hair with a hand comb.

"Master Ingrid, like I said, please stop touching my hair. You're terribly drunk, aren't you..."

As the girl, Camilla, was pushing her aside, the customer's hood slipped off.

It revealed a beautiful woman with lovely silver-grey hair.

Her long hair was tied in a bun at the back, and her charming emerald eyes were clouded by drunkenness.

She seemed to be in her thirties, or maybe a little older.

The young Eva unintentionally let out a sigh when she saw her.

"...elcome."

"Oh, welcome!"

Nobuyuki's voice reminded Shinobu that Camilla was also a customer.

"Ah, no, I... just came to pick her up, as I was ordered to."

Eva thought so, too.

In the first place, it would be strange for a pub to serve food to a child.

“But, is there anything sweet here?”

Sweet food!

The moment she heard that, something crossed the back of Eva’s mind.

Speaking of sweets, it was the witch’s favourite type of food.

“My master will eat sweets after she stops drinking. I will take that chance to take her back.”

“Sweets, huh?” said Shinobu.

“Dried fruits or anything else is fine. If you have something like that, could you give me some?”

Shinobu placed her index finger on her chin in thought, but it seemed that she couldn’t think of anything right away.

Since this store was a pub, it was reasonable to say that this was obvious.

There were no sweets to serve.

Eva felt a little relieved inside.

If there were no sweet things, this suspicious master and student would probably return immediately.

Just as Eva thought that, Shinobu clapped her hands together.

“That! There’s that!”

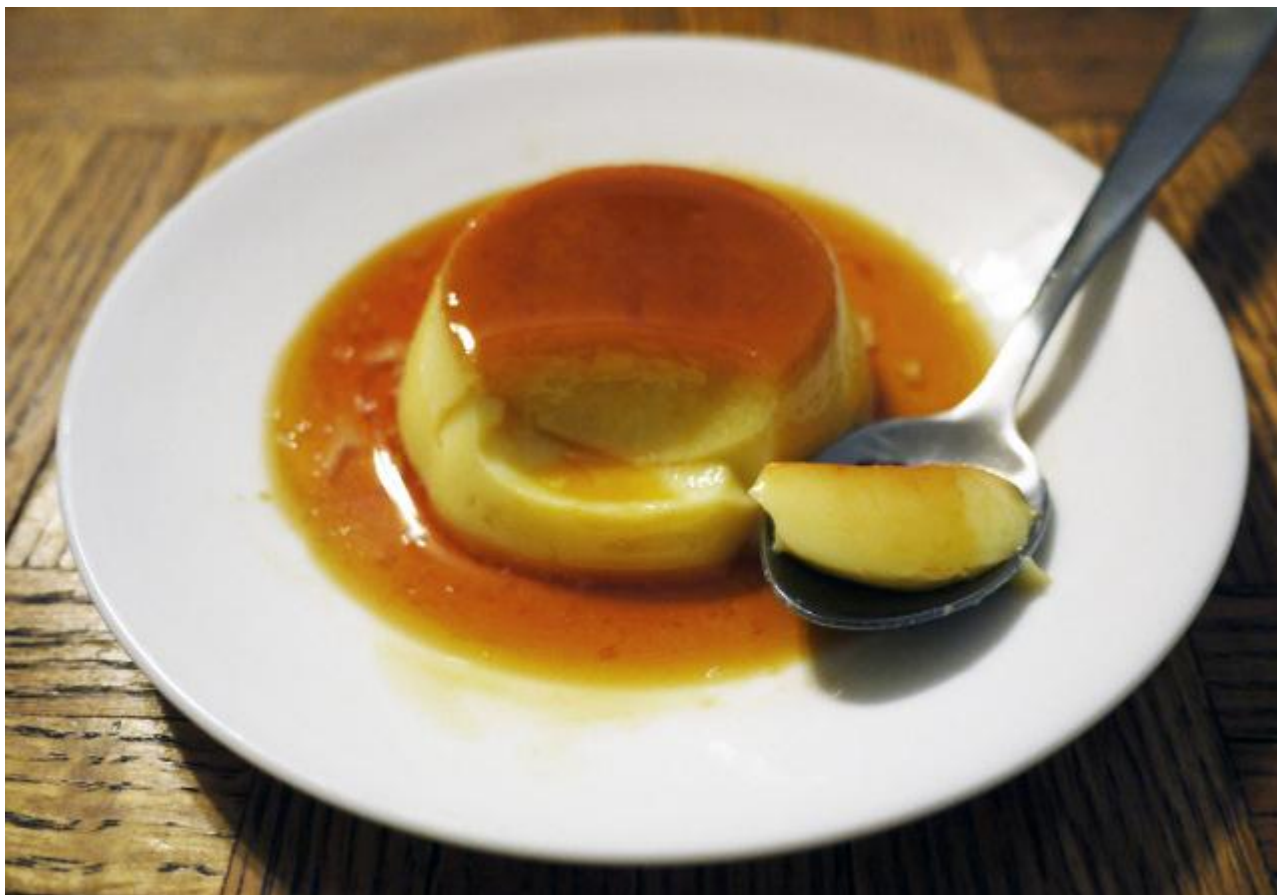
What? What was ‘that’?

Shinobu took out a rather small bowl from the refrigerator.

“Ta-dah! Shinobu’s specially made homemade pudding!”

“Homemade... pudding?”

~Pudding~



Eva had never before heard of a dish like what Shinobu had described. From what she could see when Shinobu was setting it up on the counter, could it be a cousin of the chawanmushi? The colour looked somewhat similar, too. Eva thought it must be something like a brother, a cousin, or some sort of relative to it. However, was a chawanmushi sweet?

~Chawanmushi for comparison~



“Oh, pudding? It looks delicious, doesn’t it?”

“No way, Taisho. You can’t have any.”

“Ehh, but isn’t there enough?”

Shinobu disregarded Taisho, who was speaking in a quiet, sulky tone and seemed to be dissatisfied. She started to count the number of pudding servings.

“We have Ingrid-san’s share, Camilla-chan’s share, Eva’s share, and her siblings’ share.”

“Is that alright? There doesn’t seem to be a portion for you, Shinobu-san.”

“Taisho and I are fine.”

Shinobu said so with a smile, but Taisho had eyes that seemed to bear a hint of resentment. Since chawanmushi was Eva’s favourite, she would probably like the pudding, too.

“Here, Camilla-chan. Ingrid-san as well.”

“Okay, itadakimasu!”

“Eat it with them, Eva.”

A wooden spoon was placed in Eva’s hand as she faced the pudding. It seemed that it was slightly different from chawanmushi after all. The container was cool and chilly, and it felt comfortable in her hands. Eva scooped the first spoonful and was about to bring it to her mouth when—

“This is so good!”

Ingrid raised her voice excitedly.

When she looked over, she saw Camilla scooping up the pudding like she was in a trance.

To begin with, it was a miracle to see Ingrid acting like that. It seemed that she had hidden it somewhere within herself, but somehow, it was an adorable way of eating. Eva thought about whether Ingrid could be a witch, but she gave off a different feeling

when she looked like this.

~Ingrid and Camilla~



However, just how delicious was this pudding, really?

She brought the spoon of pudding, which was still hovering in her hands, to her mouth and held it there.

Sweet!

A silky smooth sweetness spread through her entire mouth.

She opened her eyes wide in reflex, and looked into the small bowl.

What on earth was this yellow food?

“Is it delicious, Eva-chan?”

“It’s yummy! Amazing!”

As she dug into the thick pudding with her wooden spoon, a dark honey-like liquid began to well up from inside the pudding.

She scooped a little out with the tip of the spoon and licked it. It was sweet too!

It was a different kind of sweetness from the yellow part.

Next, she mixed the two parts and ate it. This also tasted wonderful.

Finishing this blessing would be such a shame.

While Eva was eating carefully, so as to not leave anything behind at the bottom of the bowl, Ingrid suddenly began to laugh loudly.

“This pudding is really magnificent. It’s absolutely magnificent. It’s almost like magic. I want to get another one, by all means.”

“I’m sorry, Ingrid-san. There’s no more pudding left.”

“These are a present for your employees, huh... umu.”

She groaned a little, and then took out a small amulet from the sleeve of her robe.

“I received this from a certain female mercenary. It’s a miraculous amulet that lets you encounter unexpected people.”

“Is that also magical?”

Camilla responded to Shinobu’s question instead.

“Master-sama, did you talk about magic in this store too?!”

“Ah no, since it’s the night of the dual moons, y’know~”

“This is why they were spooked by us when we came over to the Old Capital, so please stop with that kind of thing.”

“Ye-yeah, I’ll be careful next time...”

Ingrid seemed to shrink when she was scolded by her angry disciple.

“Then, Ingrid-san isn’t really a witch, right...?”

“That’s right, Store Manager-san. My master may look like this, but she’s a skilled doctor, you know?”

According to Camilla’s explanations, they were living in the forest owned by Baron Branton until recently. It seemed that the reclamation of the forest had gradually progressed, so they crossed over the border and came to this town.

“So, how did magic come into play?”

“It’s something like a pastime for master. It seems like she is accurate once or twice, you know?”

“It’s not just once or twice, Camilla.”

“Yes, yes. I get it, so let’s go back.”

“But, the pudding...”

At those words, Shinobu politely bowed in apology before she could finish her words. Even though Ingrid still felt regretful for having to give up the pudding, the remaining pudding belonged to Eva’s sisters and brothers.

Since it was so delicious, she wanted them to eat it, no matter what.

She felt sorry and averted her eyes from Ingrid and Camilla, while Taisho was grinning broadly.

He then opened the refrigerator and began to search for something deeper in the back. He seemed to immediately find the thing he was searching for.

“Oh? There is another pudding here.”

For some reason, Taisho said this in a monotonous voice, and Shinobu turned around with a speed that they had never seen before.

“Eh, that, that pudding, erm...”

“Shinobu-chan, it’s impossible for you to consider not eating one yourself, so you went ahead and made an extra one, didn’t you?”

“U, ughhh...”

Taisho handed over the last pudding to Ingrid while glancing sideways at Shinobu, who seemed to have gone a bit teary-eyed.

“This is the last pudding today. Please take this and savour it well.”

“Ah, thanks. But, is this okay?”

“Don’t mind her. Please have it.”

Even though no voice of resentment leaked out, Eva did not fail to notice the twitch in Shinobu’s temples.

Shinobu had probably really wanted to eat the pudding.

Ingrid praised the second pudding as “Delicious, delicious” while she cleaned it up beautifully, to the point that it wasn’t necessary to wash the container anymore.

It seemed likely that she would come to the shop again in the future.

After they both left, Eva spotted the amulet that had been left behind on the table.

It was an amulet fitted with a beautiful, ornate blue jewel.

Since the argument between Shinobu and Taisho about hiding the pudding was getting out of hand, Eva decided to secretly furnish the altar with the amulet.

Chapter 47

【Idle Talk】 An Unexpected Visitor (Part 1)

It had been a long time since he had dreamt of his former restaurant.

The ryotei Yukitsuna.

For Nobuyuki, it was the workplace where he had worked ever since he had graduated high school.

It had a somewhat well-known reputation as a well-established ryotei, but the situation had been bad.

The previous generation's manager passed away, and his eldest son could not cope with the changing circumstances.

The number of new customers did not increase, and the regulars left one after another. When a cog in the machine was out of place, everything else gradually went wrong as well.

That was the store that Nobuyuki had worked at.

The octopus that Reinhold had handed over was patted with daikon.

Doing it this way made it much more tender than rubbing it with salt.

He had learned this from his master in the kitchens of Yukitsuna.

Today, he planned to serve a gentle stew.

The cold was harsh in the Old Capital. A snack that paired well with hot sake would be appreciated.

Although it was normal for Shinobu to arrive at this time, today, there had been no sign of her yet.

He might have teased her a little too much about the pudding last night.

That matter was finally settled with Nobuyuki agreeing to buy a slightly better pudding from the cake shop in the shopping district.

He was embarrassed for having quarrelled the whole night, which was silly in itself. This had not changed from when Shinobu was still the ryotei manager's daughter.

After he had finished adequately patting the octopus, he pulled up the dashi to confirm its taste.

Recently, he had changed the taste of the dashi, little by little everyday, while watching the customers' reaction.

He wanted to make Izakaya Nobu blend in with the Old Capital.
Even though the store was bustling with regulars now, sooner or later, they might grow tired of it and stop.
Nobuyuki constantly worried about this.

He didn't want to make the same mistake as ryotei Yukitsuna.
Therefore, he wished for a bridge that could support itself.
The things he had learned from Yukitsuna, and the preferences of the residents of the Old Capital.
Nobuyuki continued looking for a bridge that connected those two together.

While he was taking notes on the state of the dashi in his college notebook, he heard a sound coming from the backdoor.
It was probably Shinobu being fashionably late.
He thought about cracking a joke, but yesterday was yesterday and today was today.
He checked again to make sure that Shinobu's pudding was in the refrigerator.

However, the sound at the backdoor strangely continued.
Surely there was no way that Shinobu had forgotten her keys. Shinobu had been trained to become the ryotei's manager, and was unparalleled when it came to managing the store.
Then, could it be that it wasn't Shinobu at the backdoor?

Nobuyuki recalled the guest who had visited the store last night.
Doctor Ingrid.
Even though her disciple said that her being a witch was just rumor, her words were strangely on his mind.
'Only necessary people can pass through.'

Now that he thought about it, there had never been any solicitations from sake dealers, and no postal or newspaper deliveries. Somehow, they had never stepped foot into the store before.
If someone tried to forcibly enter, they would stumble forward a step or two, or fall down with terrible timing.

Anyways, he needed to go check the identity of the person at the backdoor.
For the time being, he clapped his hands together in front of the Shinto altar and decided to collect yesterday's amulet before heading to the back.
Even though he had no recollection of receiving it, he somehow concluded that it had

been offered before the shinto altar this morning. It was a mystery. He stuffed the amulet into his pocket and opened the door slightly.

“Hey, it’s been a long time.”

Nobuyuki went speechless for a while.

How was this possible?

Standing in front of him, was Tonoharu, the head chef of Yukitsuna, and the master whom Nobuyuki idolized.

After Nobuyuki invited him in, Tonoharu smiled and looked around inside the store.

“It’s quite a nice store, isn’t it,”he murmured.

Tonoharu, who was wearing a jumper and sporting a crew cut, didn’t seem to have changed much, one and a half years after Nobuyuki had rushed out of that restaurant. It might have just been his imagination, but Tonoharu looked slightly shorter than before.

“Head chef, what happened to the restaurant?”

“Hey, hey, calling me Tonoharu is fine. You are a proud, independent person now. The restaurant has been left to Oyamada today.”

“Will Oyamada-san be alright...?”

When Nobuyuki was still working for the restaurant, the head chef was in there almost every day. He still remembered that even when the head chef was on holiday, he would peep into the restaurant and take care of various tasks.

Oyamada, who was in a position right below the head chef, had the skills too, but he had the habit of skimping on the fine details as much as possible. Had something changed, with him leaving the restaurant to Oyamada and coming out?

“No, well, that’s because we have an issue of unreserved seats today.”

“An issue?”

“That’s right. It’s a point of pride that we have never had a day without reservations, since the times of our predecessors.”

The situation at Yukitsuna seemed to be much worse than Nobuyuki had thought.

They had even come up with a revival plan to rebuild the failing restaurant; they had discussed receiving the son of a bank's vice-president as Shinobu's husband. It was reasonable that this would happen after Shinobu had left.

"Well, let's stop with the serious talk. Even if you've not started business, can I have a glass of beer?"

"Yes, right away."

Nobuyuki took a bottle of beer from the refrigerator and uncapped it.

Other customers were usually served beer from a barrel, but Tonoharu only drank from bottles.

The beer made a 'Glug, glug' sound as it was poured into a glass, which put a smile on Tonoharu's stern face.

"I never thought that I would be able to drink beer poured by Yazawa again. It was worth it to come all the way here."

"How did you find this place?"

"Both the young president and the senior proprietress know about this place, you know. They hired a private detective agency and found it. Well, it seems that they could never bring themselves to take a quick look, even if it's nearby."

Nobuyuki smiled vaguely and didn't respond as he served a small bowl of otoshi. It was octopus and wakame sunomono.

It was meant to be served tonight, but it was certainly ready to be sampled.

(TL note: octopus and edible seaweed pickled in rice vinegar)



~Octopus and wakame sunomono~

“Hoh, this is delicious. Is it fine to give me octopus for free?”

“Yeah, I found a new supplier.”

“I see. It’s a big deal to be able to serve octopus in a pub during an inflation period.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

Even though he had left of the store selfishly, he was delighted by the praise.

Tonohara splendidly drained the glass of beer and, with foam still hanging on his moustache, finished up the rest of the sunomono.

“Now then, what would you like to order today, Tonohara-san?”

“Then, how about you decide? Today, let’s have Yazawa Nobuyuki provide the dish he most wants to feed me.”

Chapter 48

【Idle Talk】 An Unexpected Visitor (Part 2)

Nobuyuki paused for a bit, then served the makogarei nitsuke.

Even though it was a bit inferior compared to the one he had served yesterday, this combined with the sashimi was more than enough for the match.

He wanted Tonoharu to eat the nitsuke that was seasoned according to the Old Capital's style.

He paid perfect attention to the arrangement of the dish and carefully finished plating it.

Tonoharu stared at the served plate while slowly, carefully, and nonchalantly checking its aroma.

He extended the chopsticks, and took a bite.

He immediately closed his eyes and chewed it slowly.

After a brief moment that felt like an eternity, he slowly opened his eyes.

"The taste... there is some doubt in it."

Tonoharu's one word pierced Nobuyuki's heart.

There was indeed doubt. That was why he changed the flavours everyday.

His knees nearly trembled at being seen through in an instant.

"However, it is a good kind of doubt."

"Good kind of doubt... you say?"

"Yeah, you're wavering between the taste that I taught and the taste that you're aiming for. That's how it is, you know?"

"Yes."

As Tonoharu picked up the second piece, he opened his mouth.

"How far do you want to match the customer's taste? Where do you establish the roots

of your taste? What is really correct? When I was at your age, I was very troubled by it as well.”

“Is that so?”

“I am a human being too. I was not born a chef. I also had my fair share of troubles and hardships.”

That was unexpected.

Ever since graduating from high school, Nobuyuki had looked up to Tonoharu, almost like he was a parent figure.

It felt like the Tonoharu today was just like the one he had looked up to in the past.

“There’s a word: *Shuhari*. To study, to break free, and to leave the nest.”

“*Shuhari*, huh?”

“The present you, is frustrated. Trying to break out of the shell called my teachings. This is the most critical period.”

“Breaking free, then... leaving the nest.”

“There won’t be an answer written anywhere. You have to find it yourself. You grow while serving customers.”

The words ‘Grow while serving customers’ resonated deeply in Nobuyuki’s heart. Could his current self make dishes that customers could truly appreciate? However, wasn’t it enough to use ingredients that were not available in the Old Capital to make unusual dishes?

“Conceit is a frightening thing. It will ruin your abilities before you know it. Well, there is no need for such worries in Yazawa’s situation.”

“No, I will work hard.”

Upon hearing Nobuyuki’s reply, Tonoharu drank his beer, which he had poured himself, while nodding in approval.

It was a pleasant smile that lured him into unconsciously accepting it.

“By the way, Yazawa. Let’s leave this serious topic at that.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“The octopus just now. Will you simmer it with anchovy, garlic, and chilli pepper, along with olive oil?”

At first, Nobuyuki was surprised to hear the words ‘anchovy’ and ‘olive oil’ coming out of Tonoharu’s mouth. When Nobuyuki was in Yukitsuna, Tonoharu had never seemed like he had eaten anything other than Japanese cuisine before.

“We don’t have anything as fancy as anchovies here.”

“Come on, Yazawa. This is a pub, not a ryotei. I see, I see. You can also use salted fish instead of anchovies. Even though I have not tried it, it’ll probably turn out like an imitation ahijo.”

(TL note: ahijo = dish fried in garlic. in spanish = ajillo)

“Ahijo, you say?”

He had heard that name before. If he was not mistaken, it was a dish simmered in Spanish oil.

“It is good as a snack served with wine, but it goes with beer too. Even though the octopus earlier was still slightly firm, the flavor was sufficient. It won’t be overpowered by raw ingredients like the garlic and chilli pepper either.”

“I’ll try.”

The olive oil was stocked for when Shinobu made pasta for her employee meals. He chopped up the ingredients and simmered them with olive oil for a change in flavor, and then added the octopus, which had been chopped into bite size pieces. Since he was testing it for the first time, he added just a hint of salted fish. After that, an exquisite fragrance started drifting around in the kitchen.

“This smell, it’s irresistible, isn’t it?”

“Yep, it smells appetizing.”

“Especially if you tear off a piece of baguette, dip it in this, and eat it.”

~Octopus ahijo~

When he felt like it had been cooked just right, he picked up a piece of octopus and tasted it.

It was delicious.

He had been a little anxious about using the salted fish, but it ended up tasting similar to if he had used anchovies.

The garlic and chilli pepper also blended well together.

“So? It’s delicious, right?”

Nobuyuki dished out some octopus ahijo onto a small plate and served it to the grinning Tonoharu in front of him.

Incidentally, he also took out another bottle of beer from the refrigerator.

With this kind of flavour, the beer would definitely flow.

(TL: it’s saying that the beer will definitely be finished quickly and he’ll need more. something along those lines.)

“Well, you must have tried various things. While consulting Shinobu-ojousan.”

“Shinobu-ch... ojousan, huh?”

“Hey, hey, Shinobu-chan, huh... well, it’s all good. That young lady, she may not look like it, but she possesses a palate that could change the future. Do not let that treasure go to waste.”

“Y, yes.”

Certainly, Shinobu did have a perceptive sense of taste, come to think of it.

If he had her do the tasting, his research to match the tastes of the Old Capital would probably have better progress than now.

“Thank you for everything today.”

“Hey, it’s all good. Both the young president and the senior proprietress... well, they

appear to be worried as well. I am relieved to see you looking healthy.”

“Don’t you want to meet Shinobu-ojousan?”

“I’d like to meet her, but the young lady might get homesick in one way or another.”

“Yeah...”

Yukitsuna’s crisis had not been resolved.

If Shinobu returned to the store now, the problem might return.

Nobody wished for that to happen.

“Now then, I have bothered you today.”

“I look forward to seeing you again.”

Nobuyuki bowed deeply, and Tonoharu gently patted his head.

“Next time, let me eat the dish made by Yazawa Nobuyuki after leaving the nest.”

“Yes!”

As he watched Tonoharu leave through the backdoor, Nobuyuki was already thinking about the flavours for a new dish.

He would, without fail, make his own style. Then he would make Tonoharu groan.

The moment Tonoharu turned around a corner and could not be seen anymore, his small back was replaced by Shinobu, who had just arrived.

“Ah, Taisho. I know you’re trying something new. It smells delicious, though.”

“Just a little. I was trying to make ahijo using Reinhold-san’s octopus.”

“Ahijo? Spanish cooking? That’s unusual. You’re going to feed me some, aren’t you?”

When Nobuyuki looked back at the counter, he saw that Tonoharu had completely cleaned his plate.

Nobuyuki had also finished the octopus in the frying pan, all under the pretence of sampling it.

The octopus alone had been delicious.

“Ah, umm. But here, there’s pudding...”

“Even though it smells delicious, I can’t eat it. Why?!”

“S-so... rry?”

In the end, Nobuyuki had to prepare ahijo again for Shinobu’s sake, and he also served it to Deacon Edwin, who had been lured in by the smell.

Chapter 49

The Taste of Autumn Tempura (Pt 1)

The customers were different from usual.

Shinobu noticed it as soon as they ducked under the sign curtain.

It was difficult to put into words, but they were a bit rougher than normal.

However, neither the sentry guard pair nor the company commander showed up.

Holger, who was occupying a seat at the corner of the counter, continued eating yakisoba and drinking beer with a face that seemed to say 'That's natural'.

Holger was holding the amulet that Ingrid had left behind a few days ago.

Nobuyuki had suggested consulting someone to learn about its origins.

However, Shinobu didn't know who to ask, and since it was beautifully decorated, she had Holger hold on to it.

"Sorry, but I don't know anything about this. Only those who work in this field can understand something like this. A curse specialist or something like that, or maybe even a witch?"

Even though what he said was true, Shinobu was acquaintances with neither a curse specialist nor a witch.

The closest would be Doctor Ingrid, but Shinobu couldn't possibly ask her to appraise it when Shinobu had received it from her.

"Come to think of it, is there something going on today, Holger-san?"

Shinobu asked while looking around the store, which was more lively than usual.

"Ah, even the council was greatly surprised, but apparently, the Archbishop came here. It was said that he will stay here for some time."

When Eva heard about the Archbishop, she was surprised.

Did Helmina know about it? She looked slightly troubled.

Shinobu had only the vague impression of him being an important person of the church.

“It seems that all of the Sentry Corps was mobilized, since a bigshot came. That’s because we council members had a panicked, urgent discussion about driving out all of the ruffians from the main street.”

A group of drunken customers gathered around a table reacted to the word ‘ruffians’, and stared daggers at Holger. However, the person himself didn’t mind.

Indeed, when they were driven out of the main streets, the less-than-savoury customers would take refuge in the Inns & Stables street.

When Shinobu heard that the Archbishop was going to stay here for a while, she felt completely dejected.

In other words, these customers wouldn’t be rampantly walking along the Inns & Stables street for longer than just today.

“So, why is Deacon Edwin in such a place?”

Edwin, who was also by the counter, choked when the attention was suddenly diverted to him.

He expressed his gratitude to Helmina, who had rushed to his side and rubbed his back. However, it seemed like he planned on staying quiet, and he continued drinking hot sake and eating sudako, even though he was a senior member of the church.

(TL note: sudako = pickled octopus in vinegar)



~Sudako~

Perhaps... the Archbishop was difficult to deal with, or had he gotten kicked out because he was a hinderance? It was probably something along those lines. While she was serving orders of salted and grilled sardines to the other customers, she suddenly heard a 'Kya!' break out from the table.

It had come from Helmina.

"Hold it right there! What're you doing?!"

The thug, who had grabbed Helmina's wrist, just gave a vulgar smile when Shinobu raised her voice.

"The snacks and liquor in this store are incomparable, but I think the attitudes of the waitresses are a tad cold. We are just being kind by teaching this young lady here the way an apprentice geisha should pour drinks for us."

"Please don't mess around! This isn't that kind of store!"

"Hey, hey. I'm scared, I am. Then, what kind of store is this? Why is there a fine bar like this on the miserable Stables & Inn St.?"

When she glanced over, she saw that Nobuyuki had already appeared from behind the counter, with the thickest rolling pin he had in his hands. Holger had also stood up, his sleeves rolled up, without anyone noticing.

At that moment, the atmosphere was about to explode.

"Just one moment."

However, a voice rang out from an unexpected place.

It was from a young man sitting at the table in the back, who had just been drinking quietly.

His blond hair was tied behind him in a ponytail, and he had an unshaven beard growing on his face.

No matter how you looked at him, he looked like a gambler.

"What is it, fella? Wanna have a go?"

"I just want to drink peacefully for a little bit longer. Can't I do that?"

As he said that, the young man twisted the thug's raised arm and effortlessly threw

him to the ground. It was extremely fast, like he was used to doing it. He turned, in order to protect Helmina, and whistled quietly.

“You bastard, don’t underestimate me!”

The thug’s companions rose from the table.

However, the young blond man remained calm. It felt like he was going to start humming a tune.

“Go to hell! This bastard!”

“It’s not ‘this bastard’. This prodigal person, has received the name of Arnoux from my parents, you know? If possible, I would like it if you called me that.”

“Don’t mess with me!”

However, the thug who struck Arnoux suddenly fell to the floor.

From Shinobu’s perspective, she saw that Arnoux was using the opponent’s momentum to knock them down.

Rather than Judo, it was much closer to Aikido.

Shinobu embraced Eva, thinking that there was going to be a brawl, but the situation didn’t turn out like she had predicted.

The difference between Arnoux’s skills and the those of the thugs was like the difference between heaven and earth.

Furthermore, Holger, who was cracking his knuckles while smiling, and Nobuyuki, who was seething with silent anger, were watching the thugs from behind and prevented their escape.

“Da- damn! I’ll remember this!”

“I thought he was just a third rate thug, but his parting words are third rate too. At least I got something out of this.”

Helmina bowed deeply to Arnoux, who was boasting while patting his pants.

“Um, umm, thank you very much.”

“There’s no need for that. It was the proper thing to do.”

Whether it was Arnoux's seductive voice or his pompous behaviour, both of them were beautiful.

Although he wasn't Shinobu's type, Eva seemed to be entranced by him.

"Even so, you saved us from trouble. Uhh, Arnoux-san was it?"

"No, no, Shinobu-san, was it? I wish I could've cleared things up a little bit more smoothly. I'm sorry I made such a racket."

"As a sign of gratitude, please allow us to cover your bill today."

"Oh, no, I'm satisfied with just a thank you. Even though I look like this, I happen to be someone who has the ability to earn an income and pay for my meals."

If he said it like that, Shinobu couldn't say anything else.

When she looked at Nobuyuki, he just slightly shrugged his shoulders.

Even Helmina, who was in a rough shape, didn't say a thing.

Meanwhile, Eva quietly picked up the amulet that was in Holger's seat.

"Taisho, how about giving this as a gift to Arnoux-san?"

"The amulet, huh? But, will he accept it?"

"My grandpa once said before that gamblers are superstitious. They are fond of amulets, charms, or anything similar to that."

"He~eh, there is such a saying?"

Nobuyuki narrowed his eyes at the talisman for a moment, and then handed it over to Eva, who politely presented it to Arnoux.

"One of the store's poster girls is saying... will you accept this?"

"In that case, I gratefully accept."

Arnoux received the talisman reverently, like he was the refined son of some noble, and then bowed to Eva, Helmina, and Shinobu.

"In the North, it was said that the Goddess of Fortune has three pillars. Since I have

been granted this talisman by these goddesses, I'm sure there will be a miracle."

Although it was a pretentious speech, this man exuded an unusual seductiveness when he gave it.

Holger and Edwin had already quickly turned to their drinks, though.

"Now, let's put an end to the matter here. The person from another table was eating something called tempura a while ago, right? I'd like to try that."

"Yes, I'll have it served immediately!"

Before Shinobu had even finished replying, Nobuyuki had already started to cook.

Chapter 50

The Taste of Autumn Tempura (Pt 2)

Crunch.

The tempura made a satisfying crunch as Arnoux bit into it.

It was maitake tempura. It was one of the more popular items from Izakaya Nobu's menu.

Eva and Helmina gazed at Arnoux, who had moved to the counter to eat.

"This is... amazing."

"I'm glad that it suits your tastes. Now, please do help yourself."

After frying the tempura and draining off the excess oil, Nobuyuki served the tempura directly onto Arnoux's plate.

A large amount of ingredients were prepared. He started off with shiitake mushrooms, shimeji mushrooms, and king oyster mushrooms. Then he added okras, lotus roots and green peppers, which were followed by sardines, squid and octopuses.



~Autumn Tempura~

Aronux wolfed down one bite after another.

He nearly looked like a healthy child with a very hearty appetite.

When he got food stuck in his throat due to eating too quickly, he would wash it down with beer.



“This thing called tempura. I have eaten various fried foods before... but this is the pinnacle of all fried foods. I want Isaac to eat this.”

“Isaac?” asked Shinobu.

Arnoux made a bashful grin without even stopping his hands, which were holding the tempura.

“He’s my friend. You could say that he’s my best friend.”

“By all means, please bring him along next time.”

“Yeah, Isaac has an eye for delicious things.”

Arnoux went ahead and continued eating, or rather, devouring the tempura greedily. He stabbed it with his fork, placed into his mouth, chewed, swallowed... stab, place, chew, swallow...

Holger and Edwin’s mouths watered as they watched the person between them eat. The two of them raised their hands simultaneously to order.

“Shinobu-san, one order of tempura here too.”

“Me too, if possible, make it quick.”

“Yes, one autumn tempura for each of you, coming right up. Thank you very much.”

Nobuyuki had been considered the third best chef at the Yukitsuna Ryotei and was formerly in charge of making soups, so naturally, he was skilled.

However, the plate was constantly emptied, since the three people quickly gobbled up whatever he served up.

“The tempura won’t run away, even if you don’t eat them so quickly, you know.”

“No, but Shinobu-chan, even if it doesn’t run away, it will cool down.”

“Isn’t it the most sincere thing you can do, to eat something so delicious when it has just been freshly fried?”

Disregarding the two who were stuffing their mouths as they spoke, Arnoux, who was

slowly savouring it, mumbled something else to himself.

“This exquisite crunchy texture, it’s like a maiden walking barefoot on a sandy beach during the early summer... No, it’s different. It’s the same as the stars filling up the entire autumn sky.”

“Arnoux-san, is that a poem or something?”

“Yeah, to be honest, I was aiming to be a minstrel.”

“Minstrel... huh.”

Shinobu caught her words and flusteredly stopped herself.

Although she did not know what kind of poetry this world had, judging by the reactions of the two people who were engrossed with the tempura, Helmina, and even Eva, Arnoux’s poem didn’t seem to be that good.

Even though his way of treating women and his pretentious display was masterful, his poetry skills were severely lacking. She figured that he was that sort of guy.

“Ah, Arnoux-san, what kind of poetry do you compose?”

“That’s the source of the problem so far. Should I sing about war and heroes like Boehringer, or express the beauty of nature like De Starvak, or choose to sing about painful fleeting love like Ineem or Garmlich?”

“H-Huh?”

Even though Arnoux was passionately naming famous people, Shinobu naturally didn’t know any of them. She felt that the range of poem genres here didn’t differ that much from her original world.

Before she knew it Arnoux had stood up and was adding gestures to his speech.

“However, I think it is fate to have come across this Izakaya Nobu. I have now decided the direction that I should aim for. It’s Crowvinkel. Like Crowvinkel, I shall recite poems about delicious cuisines and liquor. Don’t you that’s a good idea?!”

Shinobu realized it from his loud declaration.

This customer was drunk. For that matter, he was dead drunk.

The people of the Old Capital were good drinkers, but it didn’t show on their faces.

Even if they drank too much, they would only become slightly red faced, or they would look somewhat sleepy. Therefore, even if one had Shinobu's eyes, it was difficult to notice it sometimes.

She coaxed Arnoux into sitting down while thinking about the fact that she had only served a single mug of beer to Arnoux.

What on earth should she do?

Even if she could try to find his friend, Isaac, the guards were with the honourable Archbishop today, so it was highly unlikely that they would turn up in the store.

While she was thinking about that, it became strangely noisy outside of the store.

"Get that bastard Arnoux to come out!"

"What should I do..."

Shinobu had turned pale when Arnoux gently tapped her shoulder.

"It's alright. Please, leave it to me."

As soon as he said that, Arnoux took a brave step out through the glass door alone. There wasn't even time to stop him.

He landed a good blow on the bridge of the shouting person's nose, then immediately went around his back in one fluid motion and gripped his neck in a chokehold.

"Oops, you guys. You had better not make any careless movements. Right now, I am on the verge of becoming drunk. If I'm careless in holding back, I might make a mistake."

He had put on such a good act that some of the men, whom were raising their rough voices rowdily thus far, became uneasy, and kept silent as they retreated a step back. While observing the situation with his bleary, drunken eyes, Arnoux jerked his chin at the nearest person.

"You there, if you value this guy's life, collect your fellow companions' wallets."

"Eh, no, isn't this extortion?"

"Extortion? Don't say such stupid things. When your pleasant companions were being violent in the store just now, they left without paying. The bill, you know."

“But, this is too much...”

“It’s for the interest and the lesson fee, you know. Pay up quickly!”

“Y-yes...”

The leader grumbled in pain as he watched the miserable thug, who was about to burst into tears, collect his companions wallets.

“This method and those skills, could you be... [Drunken Eyes] Arnoux?”

“This is why I gave you my name. I am Arnoux.”

When they heard his name, the men, whom seemed to be waiting for a sign to strike, instantly got cold feet.

“H-hey, it’s [Drunken Eyes] Arnoux...”

“Several years ago, there was a legend that the thugs of the Old Capital were taken care of by only two people... Even though it was rumored that those people had disappeared.”

“Doesn’t he have a weakness of some sort?”

“There are only two. But...”

“Hey, what is this?”

The commotion spread like a ripple among the thugs.

‘Arnoux’s weakness.’ At those words, Shinobu and Nobuyuki looked at each other. What kind of weakness did he have?

“[Drunken Eyes] Arnoux... As his name suggests, he can’t hold his liquor. He gets drunk with just a mug of ale.”

“How is that useful in a fight?! What’s the other one!?”

“That is... His poetry skills suck.”

When he heard those words, Arnoux shouted out in rage.

He lifted the body of the thug he was holding in a chokehold and threw him at the thugs who had described his poetry skills.

He picked up a wooden stick that one of the thugs had unintentionally dropped and plunged into the crowd of thugs.

“A-ah...”

For Shinobu, Nobuyuki, and the people in front of the store, it had unexpectedly turned from a brawl between one person versus ten others into a battle between a berserker and ten people, right in front of them.

The results were obvious.

“I apologise for the mess.”

When everything had ended, Arnoux was the only one that remained standing in front of Izakaya Nobu.

The remaining 10 thugs had been knocked out and were groaning weakly.

“Here, this is what these fellows forgot to pay just now.”

Arnoux said as he held out the leather bag, which Shinobu timidly received.

Then, without saying anything else, Arnoux waved with the back of his hand and disappeared into the night of the Old Capital.

Eva murmured,

“From now on, let’s not talk about poetry in this store, ever.”

Everyone there firmly nodded in agreement.

Chapter 51

Oysters (Part 1)

“At any rate, this is thrilling.”

Berthold cheerfully drained his first glass of ‘Toriaezu Nama’. He had managed to capture ten thugs, who hadn’t shown their true colours until now, all at once. It would be difficult not to drink while in this cheerful mood.

“I would like to give my thanks to that guy, Arnoux, as well.”

“I don’t think Arnoux-san would appreciate this kind of thing.”

Shinobu cut the lemon while smiling.

The sun was still up. Izakaya Nobu was preparing to open the store later, but Berthold had come to learn about yesterday’s case, so he was quenching his thirst with a glass as a side benefit.

It was alright to report the incident tomorrow, since he planned to go directly home today.

That was the reason he could drink to his heart’s content now.

“Even though there was a fuss about the Archbishop coming, in the end, he brought along a few escorts of his own, so the sentries are back on normal duty.”

“What kind of business did he have in the Old Capital?”

“Well. It was the story about the ‘Witch’.”

Shinobu and Eva looked at each other upon hearing the word ‘Witch’.

They probably had an inkling about it, but that discussion only concerned the Archbishop. It had nothing to do with Berthold.

“There were rumours that there was a witch aimlessly wandering around the Old Capital, but that doesn’t mean that she has done any harm. Even the story about the witch hunt of Wilgem is from over a hundred years ago. I don’t think this is something

so troublesome that the Archbishop would purposely poke his nose into.”

“T-that’s right.”

“Come to think of it, Shinobu san. Where’s Taisho?”

Berthold asked that while his new wife, Helmina, was pouring ‘Toriaezu Nama’ for him. Shinobu made an apologetic expression.

“To be honest, he had a sudden craving for something, so he went to buy it.”

“Taisho having a craving for something? That’s interesting.”

While he was expressing his interest, Berthold made a rough guess as to what it was. Chicken karaage.

Perhaps he had found an excellent chicken. When he saw Shinobu cutting a large amount of lemons, he thought there might be karaage tonight.

He unconsciously smiled, but since Helmina gave him a strange look, he quickly made a more serious expression.

“I’m back.”

Berthold peered into the back, since he heard a voice coming from the back door. It was Taisho, who came in while carrying a big bag.

Somehow, the smell of the sea was coming from the bag.

Helmina, who had a good nose, stirred as she thought the same thing. Since she was originally a fisherman’s daughter, that smell was probably familiar to her.

“Oh, Berthold-san. You came?”

“Taisho, are you not going to make karaage today?”

“Karaage...? I can make anything you like, but today I’m cooking *kaki*.”

(TL note: kaki = oysters. romanised this solely for the next part)

Ka-ki?

He never knew about that ingredient before. He and Helmina looked at each other, but it seemed that his wife didn’t know either. She shook her head slightly, in an adorable manner.

The contents of the bag clanked around as Taisho poured them out onto the chopping board.

They were somewhat large shellfish.

“Oh, it’s just gun shellfish.”

“Do you recognise this, Berthold-san?”

“Yeah, I ate this often in the port city near the Eastern Kingdom, back when I was making easy money there.”

While answering Shinobu, Berthold’s memory wandered to the faraway Eastern Kingdom.

The white wine that nourished a body worn out from the battlefield. After that, this gun shellfish.

He nearly drooled just from remembering the rich taste from when he had slurped it up.

It was delicious. It was good if it was grilled, but eating it raw was fine too.

“However, why do you call it gun shellfish?”

“Oh yeah, if one is unlucky, you will find out.”

“Yeah, it’s the same here too, isn’t it?”

“Occasionally, some people die too. It is rare though.”

Amongst Berthold’s former war buddies, there had been a guy who had died because of this gun shellfish.

Even though he had died from from getting sick after eating a gun shellfish, he would probably start eating them again if he was revived, so in a sense, it was probably kind of satisfying in a way for him.

“Now then.”

While he was cleaning his hands with the warm towel, he stared at the gun shellfish with high hopes. Their size was also wonderful. If that was the case, white wine would definitely help.

“Berthold-san, I have a feeling that you want to start drinking already.”

“It’s not just a feeling, Taisho. I am already determined to start drinking immediately. Perhaps my feelings are leaking out from my body.”

“No, but this oyster is for tonight.”

“Don’t be stubborn, Taisho. Making me wait while dangling such a delicious-looking gun shellfish in front of me is outrageous.”

Berthold was correcting his sitting posture as he gave the pondered Taisho a little push, when Helmina tugged on his sleeve for some reason.

“Hm? Do you want to eat the gun shellfish too, Helmina?”

When he asked that, she just shook her head.

Even after marrying her, he had never seen this kind of reaction before. He held her shoulders gently and asked what was wrong, but she did not answer.

He wondered if she had her circumstances, but he couldn’t help if she didn’t respond when he asked. He was concerned, but the gun shellfish came first.

“Taisho, I do not need any dish that is time-consuming. Just two or three pieces of the fresh, raw gun shellfish will do...”

Helmina tugged on his sleeve again at the words ‘raw’. This time, it was a little stronger than before.

When he turned around, he could barely see faint tears in her eyes for some reason.

“Hey Helmina, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

Still, his wife shook her head slightly and wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes.

“If you have something to say, you can tell me, Helmina.”

Then, Helmina whispered in a soft voice that she didn’t normally use.

“I... don’t want Berthold-san dying from eating the shellfish.”

“Helmina...”

Certainly, you could get ill by eating gun shellfish.
However, it was almost impossible to die from that.
As far as Berthold knew, only one person had died after getting ill.

“You don’t have to worry, Helmina. Even if I get sick, I will only get an upset stomach at most.”

“You can’t. Even if it is a one in a thousand chance, I don’t want you to die...”

Worried about the surrounding people, Berthold hugged Helmina, who was burying her head in his chest, while patting her back when something flashed across his mind.

“H-hey, Helmina... don’t tell me, you...”

Helmina nodded without opening her eyes.
She smiled shyly while caressing her belly, which did not look different from normal yet.

“Yes. It seems I’ve been blessed.”

“OOOOOOOH!”

Berthold himself was surprised at the volume of his unintentionally raised voice.
He did not understand why he was this happy.
He didn’t know this kind of feeling existed. Even then, this was real.

Taisho, Shinobu, and Eva clapped as well.
From their surprised faces, it seemed that Helmina had not told them yet.
It felt pleasant to receive congratulatory words from them.

“Helmina, we should celebrate! You have to eat nutritious things!”

“So, you can’t eat gun shellfish, okay?”

“Obviously! But, Nobu is serving gun shellfish today...”

Shinobu smiled at Berthold, who was happy yet flustered.

“There is a way to eat it without getting sick, you know.”

Chapter 52

Oysters (Part 2)

The way Taisho removed the shell of the gun shellfish reflected his expertise. Inserting the knife and slowly twisting it, cutting the adductor muscle of the shellfish and then opening it up. Normally, this was something that required some effort. Berthold had went to stores that were designed to have the customer grill the seafood by themselves on a net, but it had been difficult to remove the shell until they got the hang of it.

The shell of the gun shellfish was peeled off one after another, just like magic. This revealed the thick, tender flesh underneath. Berthold had promised not to eat the gun shellfish raw, but he didn't look very convincing. It was tempting. Helmina pouted slightly and tugged on Berthold's sleeve again when he unconsciously gulped his saliva.

"Shinobu, please prepare the tartar sauce."

"Y~es. Oh, the pickles are perfect today."

"They are such good oysters. I can't help but be serious with them."

While Taisho was preparing the gun shellfish, Shinobu, who was beside him, was chopping up boiled eggs into fine pieces. He had seen her do that when they made chicken nanban!

"Are you going to deep-fry the gun shellfish?"

"Yes, you are correct, Berthold-san!"

Shinobu smiled while skillfully using the egg's shell to separate the egg yolks. In addition to the chopped boiled egg and pickles, they seemed to be making a sauce. He had only been concerned about the taste when he had eaten chicken nanban previously, but it seemed that it took a lot of time and effort to make the sauce.

While he was feeling impressed, Eva was diligently carrying something towards the glass door.

It was a shichirin: a portable cooking stove used for grilling that consumed charcoal as fuel. It had played an active part in Izakaya Nobu during the chilly autumn season. If Berthold had still been a mercenary, the war band would have wanted something like this for long winters.

“Taisho, is that...”

“I stocked up on too many oysters today. Shouldn’t we share the fragrance with the customers of Inns & Stables Street?”

Taisho grinned while saying that, but he didn’t just intend to share the fragrance. He was a great tactician.

If one saw the gun shellfish grilling in front of the store, even those who did not know how it tasted would stop moving. After that, they would be enticed into entering Nobu.

After Taisho finished coating the gun shellfish with a fluffy coating, he slid them into oil, just like the chicken karaage.

The small bubbles and popping sounds entered Berthold’s ears and stimulated his stomach.

“Is Helmina eating too?”

“Yes, I guess I should try some.”

When he saw what Helmina was holding in her hands as he questioned her, Berthold was almost taken aback.

Helmina was happily nibbling on a lemon.

It was a lemon wedge from the pile Shinobu had cut earlier.

“H-hey, Helmina...”

“When I’m like this, sour things seem delicious to me.”

When she caressed her belly while saying so, Berthold could only groan.

He had tasted the bitterness and the sweetness of the battlefield, but he was completely inexperienced when it came to family. Not to mention, he did not understand pregnancy.

“There are a lot of things to think about, but please fully support Helmina-san.”

“If you say so, Shinobu-chan. I have no idea what to do for the time being.”

“Shouldn’t you think of a name for the baby?”

A name. It was certainly as she said.

It might be a bit hasty, but in a battle, it was appropriate to do what you could do first.

“That’s true, a name. A strong sounding one is good. Georg or Arthur, maybe?”

“Please wait a moment, Berthold-san. It’s not yet decided that the child will be a boy.”

“Yeah, that’s right. It could be a girl too, right?”

A gallant name and a pretty name.

When he thought about them at the same time, he became very confused. As soon as he thought of a good name, the face of someone he knew with the same name would come up, so he had to start all over again.

He wanted to name the child after a respected person if possible, but since it had taken great effort to bring the child into this world, he also wanted to think of the child’s name by himself.

While he was thinking about various things, the crackling and popping sounds coming from the gun shellfish swimming in the pot of oil had changed.

“Oh Taisho, is it going to be ready soon?”

“Yeah, it’s almost time.”

Taisho said as he drained the oil from the gun shellfish and started piling them up onto a plate.

“Hm? Why did you not fry it twice like the chicken?”

“Chicken and pork taste good when they are fried twice, but shellfish can only withstand fire for so long.”

“Heeh” Berthold interjected as he refreshed his mouth with ‘Toriaezu Nama’.
In his head, he recalled the rich flavours of raw gun shellfish, but the one in front of him was fried.

How would it taste?

Berthold swallowed his saliva again as Shinobu placed the plate in front of him. The sound of the plate being served on his table also stimulated his appetite.

“Well, please enjoy. This is fried oyster. Please eat it with the tartar sauce.”

~Fried Oysters~



Even though a knife and fork were provided, Berthold didn’t use the knife. Instead, he ate it in one mouthful. That was the proper way of eating it. He understood it intuitively.

Crunch.

It had a pleasant texture, along with the pure, creamy bliss of a rich flavour. He had believed that eating gun shellfish raw was the best until now, but this was also wonderful. Even though it was a completely different flavour from eating it raw, it wasn’t a matter of which was better.

If that was supreme, then this was the ultimate.

The two couldn't be compared to each other.

He vigorously returned a nod to Helmina, who was watching anxiously, and dipped the next one into the tartar sauce.

It was delicious with the chicken nanban, but it was suitable for this fried oyster too.

Taisho opened the glass door. Cool air suddenly blew into the warm room.

It was comfortable on the flushed cheeks caused by the store's warmth and the 'Toriezu Nama'.

The grilled gun shellfish on the table, were making crackling sounds.

The store would probably soon become full of customers enticed by the smell.

Someday, Berthold wanted to bring his child to this store.

While filling his mouth with the third piece of fried oyster, Berhold looked at Helmina and smiled.

Chapter 53

Mushroom Ahjio

“It’s delicious today, too.”

Hans had just left after finishing his lunch, leaving only Arnoux and Ingrid in the restaurant.

Even though Izakaya Nobu only started serving in the evening, the regulars came before that.

They couldn’t bring themselves to send them away, so they served them until Arnoux and Ingrid felt comfortable enough to come almost every day.

“Are you going to eat tempura again?”

“And are you going to eat pudding again, Granny Ingrid?”

They always ordered tempura and pudding. Shinobu had even started preparations for them way before those two even knocked on the glass door.

“Since you came to this izakaya that serves delicious food, how about trying other things besides tempura?”

“If you put it that way, then shouldn’t Granny Ingrid order something else besides pudding?”

“I’m good. I do not have many years left. I should eat my favourite food before this short life disappears.”

“I think that you’re healthy enough to live to a hundred.”

Although they were trading barbs, there was no ill will between them. Even though there didn’t seem to be any common grounds between a doctor and a prodigal son, for some reason, they got along well.

Ingrid, who was repeating this kind of exchange, suddenly dropped her gaze to

Arnoux's plate. It was maitake tempura. As Nobuyuki had stocked up on some good maitake mushrooms today, he was able to serve them confidently.



~Maitake mushroom tempura~

“Mushrooms, huh. That’s an unusual species.”

“Y-yeah, I got it from a special supplier.”

Ingrid stabbed the maitake mushroom with a fork while replying with a “Hmm~”

“Speaking of mushrooms, I have a silly story.”

It was probably due to the alcohol that Ingrid was talking in a sleepy tone while chuckling to herself.

“Once there was a nun, Beanpole, and a trainee priest, Shorty, from the Holy Kingdom. Shorty was a diligent person, but people always made fun of him for being small. He was always waiting for a chance to win them over, when one day, an important task appeared.”

The important task was to receive the senior nobles, who came on a pilgrimage to the Magisterium in the Holy Capital, for the feast held by the Church Headquarters. Since there would be huge donations from these nobles, failure was unacceptable.

Two young people were entrusted with the duty to investigate the dishes. Even though they had hired chefs from distinguished inns in the Holy Capital, they still had to

review the menu that was to be served during the reception. Their role was to check the recipes to identify which ingredients would be used. Beanpole was in charge of the alcohol and desserts, while Shorty was in charge of the main course.

“Shorty was very eager. He steadily began to hunt down old documents and books. He even made some small discoveries, you know. But...”

“But?”

Ingrid chuckled louder at Shinobu’s impatience.

“He forgot to investigate the most crucial point, the customs in the territory of Marquis Sachnussenburg.”

Arnoux reacted slightly to the name of Marquis Sachnussenburg, but Ingrid continued talking without paying him any heed.

“That marquis’s territory is just in the vicinity of the Old Capital (Aiteria), you know? They do not eat mushrooms in that area. Shorty had not investigated it, so he had overlooked the large plate that was served first, which made use of plenty of mushrooms. It was a silly story.”

(TL: after much contemplation, I’ve decided to use the official name of the Old Capital, Aiteria, which is used in the LN and manga. I’ll still put in “Old Capital” for now and replace it completely with Aiteria after some time.)

An unpleasant, cold sweat ran down Shinobu’s back. It was important for a ryotei to know what sort of food the customers avoided. However, it didn’t mean nothing came to mind from the current story.

From Shinobu’s knowledge, a big mistake like that never happened in Yukitsuna. However, among the chefs they hired, some had caused similar incidents, which resulted in their expulsion.

“And then, what happened to Sachnussenburg?”

Ingrid smiled at Arnoux, who asked that with a sorrowful expression.

“You don’t have to worry about what happened, Arnoux. Shorty was safe. At that time, Sachnussenburg was known to be a benevolent lord. However, it was necessary for someone to take responsibility.”

“The marquis wasn’t offended?”

“Shinobu isn’t a child, so you will probably understand? The two people for this role were chosen from a somewhat large group. This was why they were troubled and discussed who to choose among the two of them.”

“Then, was it the trainee priest...”

“No, it was the nun who left the Holy Kingdom. All the blame was put on her shoulders.”

A letter about her bearing full responsibility was sent to her by the authorities, but it seemed that by the next morning, there were no longer any signs of Beanstalk the nun in the Holy Capital. It seemed that the talk was settled by having Beanstalk, who had conveniently escaped, as the true culprit and Shorty was just dragged into it.

“After all was said and done, Shorty was able to continue his studies and had a promising future. Everything was settled and he lived happily ever after.”

“Then, what about Beanstalk-san?”

“I wonder. She might have unexpectedly become successful somewhere.”

Ingrid laughed while saying so as she seemed brighter than usual.

“At any rate, mushrooms can’t be served around here, huh. I did not know because everyone was eating it normally.”

Arnoux responded to Shinobu’s murmurs.

“About a hundred years ago, there was a witch hunt around here. They suspected the witch spread food poisoning using mushrooms. They were groundless accusations in the end, but they did not feel sorry about it. There were a lot of poisonous mushrooms that were difficult to tell apart around here. There were also stories about mushrooms that were poisonous only when alcohol was ingested.”

“You’re considerably well-informed, Arnoux.”

“Everyone knows about this in the neighbourhood, but this young chap isn’t worried about it, since it is wasteful to leave what has been served.”

Arnoux laughed while taking a bite of the maitake tempura.

“So, Shinobu and Taisho. Here’s some friendly advice, I recommend that you stop serving mushrooms or mushroom-like dishes around this area.”

“We have already sold a lot, though.”

“When a hundred years have passed, even the practice of abstaining from mushrooms will also fade. It is better to use them with caution. It is difficult to recognise through a dish like tempura, so it may not be a problem.”

“I see.” Shinobu nodded while Nobuyuki sent a regretful look at her.

“Taisho, don’t tell me that you–?!”

“I have... stocked up on a lot of mushrooms...”

One of Nobuyuki’s bad habits was stocking up on too many ingredients. When he found a good ingredient, he would stock up on more than the necessary amount. Shinobu looked inside the sack that Nobuyuki pointed, and let out a gasp.

“What, what do we do with this...”

“They can’t be kept for a long time either, so I wanted to serve them as soon as possible.”

Arnoux and Ingrid both faced Nobuyuki, who was feeling troubled, and gave pleasant smiles.

“Fortunately, Arnoux and I do not mind mushrooms, so please prepare to serve them rapidly. We’ll help you in disposing of your stockpile.”

Ingrid’s words lit a fire under Nobuyuki. He rolled up his sleeves and began preparing the mushrooms. He cut the mushrooms into large, bite-sized pieces and then heated them in some olive

oil in a frying pan. He did not forget the red capsicum either.

“Hoh, are you going to stew them in oil?”

“Do you know about this, Ingrid-san?”

“I ate it many times when I was young. It was pretty cheap and delicious. I even tried to make it for Camilla, but it is hard to get good olive oil here, in the North.”

The aromatic fragrance of the olive oil tickled her nose. The smell of the garlic Nobuyuki threw into the pan tantalized their empty stomachs. After that, he added some salt and parsley and completed the ahijo.

~Mushroom ahijo~

“Come to think of it, Taisho, didn’t you make ahijo the other day too?”

“I used octopus that time, though.”

“Up till now, you have devoted yourself completely to Japanese dishes. Was there a turn of events? That being said, I think it’s good to have a variety of things on the menu, since Nobu is an izakaya.”

“*Shuhari*. It’s *shuhari*.”

He successfully distracted Shinobu because the ahijo on the plate looked too tasty. If using mushrooms was not a problem, he would’ve liked to add it to the menu. Arnoux, from the tempura faction, and Ingrid, from the pudding faction, were also waiting with forks in hand as they swallowed their saliva.

“Here, please enjoy.”

After serving the dishes, Nobuyuki began to grill some bread. It was an orthodox way of toasting the baguette, so it wasn’t as thoroughly prepared as he had expected. It was something Nobuyuki, who lived on the second floor of the store, would buy for breakfast.

He dipped the bread in the olive oil, which had soaked up the flavour of the mushrooms and garlic, and ate it. It was better than he had thought. He wanted to eat it. He had to eat it. Shinobu was about to ask to split it with her, but Taisho just smiled.

“Sorry, Shinobu-chan. I put in too much garlic.”

“Ta-Taisho...”

Since she was in charge of serving people, she couldn't eat a lot of garlic before opening hours.

Nobuyuki started on the next dish immediately, ignoring Shinobu voicing her resentment while shedding tears of blood.

He boiled water in a stockpot and cooked pasta.

He then heated up the rest of the ahijo in the frying pan and threw the pasta into it. He mixed them together properly, turning it into an oil pasta with mushrooms. Since he added some red capsicum and basil leaves, it would probably be easy to eat.



~Mushroom aglio e olio peperoncini~

“Master, are you here today too?”

Camilla made an appearance at just the right time.

Previously, she had worn a red robe, but it seemed the black one that she had gotten from Ingrid was her recent favourite.

If anything, the reason she put on the same appearance as Ingrid was probably because she wanted to be a doctor from the Ichin Institute, just like her master.

“Ah, that’s not fair master! You’re eating something delicious!”

“How about you, Camilla? Taisho boiled pasta, you know.”

“Thank you very much!”

Camilla challenged Nobuyuki’s boiled peperoncino with a fork.

“Spicy!”

It seemed to be a little bit too spicy for Camilla’s tongue, but she ate it with gusto, despite her wheezing.

Nobuyuki made up his mind to make an ahijo pasta without garlic for Shinobu before he finished using up the stockpile of mushrooms.

Chapter 54

Gyusuji Doteyaki (Part 1)

When Isaac bit into the sardine tempura, he became silent.

What was this?

He had casually come to meet Arnoux, and to check out the next great store that the latter had mentioned. However, how did such a food exist in this world?

Up until now, Arnoux had recommended many slightly trendy stores and restaurants. Most of them were Eastern Kingdom-style restaurants with fairly tasty food.

Still, as tasty as they were, Isaac could still reproduce the flavour.

As a chef's son, Isaac vaguely felt like he wanted to be involved in cooking in the future. He had trained enough to not be an embarrassment of a chef. For Isaac, this dish that he was unable to make himself was an object of marvel.

It wasn't like he didn't know the ingredients. Wheat flour, eggs, and water were mixed together to coat the ingredients before they were deep fried. That was it. However, even if he made it himself, it probably wouldn't taste the same. Isaac suspected that it involved laborious preparation.

"Does it not suit your taste?"

He shook his head at the waitress, who was watching him anxiously, before throwing the remaining sardines into his mouth. As expected, it was delicious. The lager that he was drinking and nearly choked on was also delicious, just as the rumours said.

Even though the night was still young, Izakaya Nobu was already busy. The small shop was lively with regulars and first time customers, all enjoying their food and drinks as they liked. Isaac had visited many pubs around the Imperial Capital, but even if he had paid 1000 gold, it would have been difficult to find a store with an atmosphere like this.

"At any rate, you came, Arnoux-san's friend."

"Say, did Arnoux-sama cause any trouble here?"

“He’s not that troublesome.”

The main subject, Arnoux, wasn’t here because that blond-haired prodigal son had broken his promise to come. Not only did Arnoux and the tall, black-haired Isaac look like polar opposites, they also had contrasting personalities. Isaac was serious, while Arnoux was whimsical. This was why they got along well. Isaac was like the older brother that Arnoux had yearned for.

“It’s a pity that Arnoux-san couldn’t come today.”

“It is, isn’t it? Well, I think Arnoux would have enjoyed this delicious food and liquor, too.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

He had a rough guess of what Arnoux was doing right now. He was investigating the movements of the thugs who had rampaged at this store. The thugs who were caught by the guards had paid a fine, so they had only stayed in prison for a single day and had already left town.

There was also a rumor about a man named Damien, who had joined forces with the boss of the thugs of the Old Capital (Aiteria). Isaac was posted here just in case any thugs feeling resentment for this store came to seek revenge.

He had eaten the sardines just now, so he extended this fork to the kakiage next. He wanted to cut up the kakiage, which contained onions and small shrimp, with his knife, but he bit into it instead, even though it was a bit improper.

Crunch, crunch.

Crunch, crunch.

Crunch, crunch.

(TL note: kakiage is mixed vegetable/seafood tempura)



~Kakiage~

He finished eating a whole piece, without ever dropping his fork, before he had even realized it.

The oil from eating many deep-fried onions would probably be heavy on his stomach, but there seemed to be a solution to that.

He couldn't get enough of the mellow sweetness of the soft and crispy onions.

Before he even needed to order, the waitress had already refilled his mug with a second serving of lager. He wanted to say something but smiled instead. This was probably why Arnoux was fond of this store. Even though Arnoux didn't look like it, he was terribly hard to please when it came to customer service, but Isaac could relax in a shop like this, since it was so thorough with its service.

Even the mushroom tempura had an interesting texture. Until now, whenever he wanted to eat mushrooms, he would only boil or stew it. In the northern lands where Isaac's ancestors had lived, there were mushrooms that had to be boiled properly, or else the poison would remain. Since this wisdom was handed down to him, he didn't eat mushrooms unless they were boiled, but there were recipes like this tempura, too.

The most surprising thing was the tree roots. Even though the waitress, Shinobu, called this gobou, no matter how he saw it, it looked like the roots of a tree that had been thinly sliced.

It was mixed together with carrots to make kakiage. The texture wasn't the same as the onions, but this was also delicious.

(TL note: gobou = burdock root)

"The world of cooking is full of marvels, isn't it? I never thought that the roots of a tree would be so delicious."

"The burdock root is good, isn't it? It was my grandfather's favourite dish."

Isaac couldn't utter a word to Shinobu, who was smiling as she spoke. She probably came from a land that was poor enough that they had to dig for tree roots. They might have tried frying it in order to make it even slightly more delicious. By deep-frying the burdock, which was a tree root, it would no longer be just a tree root.

It had become a cuisine.

This dish, after three generations, had turned into this tempura. It probably came to the point where the ingredients were easily acquired, and from there, they tried to come up with the original idea to coat the fried roots with batter. With the addition of eggs, this dish was completed as the tempura.

If that were the case, he could understand the elaborate preparations for it. Their noble minds allowed them to make the most out of every ingredient. It seemed that they had put a lot of effort into this ingredient, which had become available in excess anywhere, and elevated it into a dish.

While eating up the plate filled with tempura, Isaac's curiosity as a chef, which was welling inside of him, burst forth.

This tempura was delicious.

In addition, it could make various other dishes delicious. He wanted to learn this skill. If he saw anything he could copy, he would go for it.

"This tempura is tasty. I want something has strong flavours next... I'd like to eat something stewed."

"Yes, a stew dish with strong flavours, coming up!"

Chapter 55

Gyusuji Doteyaki (Part 2)

The taciturn shopkeeper began to prepare the food. However, Isaac's expectations fell greatly. It seemed that the dish had already been cooked in a pot, and the shopkeeper had simply begun to heat it up in a slightly smaller one. The pot was placed on the fire, and when it had started to make simmering noises, a sweet smell drifted from it. Although it smelled a bit like boiled beans, this was different.

"Shinobu-san, what is that dish?"

"Oh, that is gyusuji doteyaki."

"Gyusuji doteyaki, huh? Fumu~"

(TL note: gyusuji = beef tendon)

He had never heard of it before.

It seemed that there was beef churning inside the pot, but it wasn't a part that he usually ate. The dish wasn't something that was usually displayed on the dining table, so it was most likely the tendons. If it wasn't boiled very thoroughly, it was better left uneaten, since it would be tough.

"That thing that's being boiled together with the beef tendon... what is it?"

"It's konnyaku."

"Konnyaku...?"

Another word that he had never heard of before appeared. He was confident that he was quite familiar with the dishes from the Empire, the Eastern Kingdom, and the Three Territories of the North, but he couldn't recall such an ingredient.

Its soft appearance made him think that it might be some sort of internal organs.

The internal organs weren't distributed and sold very often, since it was difficult to maintain their freshness. Hence, each region had their own name for them. Even

though he could tell which portion it was by sight, he wouldn't recognize it if it was called by a different name.

Was this dish, which used beef tendon and internal organs, also born out of poverty?

Even so, this smell!

As the fire spread and warmed it up, the fragrance that was tickling his nose intensified. Together, its rich, sweet aroma and the sounds of its simmering hit his stomach directly. Even though he had eaten tempura just now, he somehow felt like he had not eaten yet.

“Here, sorry to keep you waiting!”

There were some finely chopped spring onions on top. The gyusuji doteyaki, a thick, light brown soup containing meat and konnyaku mixed together, was served in a small bowl.





~Gyusuji doteyaki~

Upon closer inspection, the meat was, as expected, beef tendons. He had some knowledge about cooking the tougher portions of the meat through boiling or grilling, and he had enjoyed its chewy texture before. It was a technique of cooking that placed importance on the natural flavours of every part of the meat. However, he was curious about its smell. Its rich, sweet aroma was very thick. Wouldn't the flavours of the meat be covered up? Isaac wondered to himself as he brought the first bite into his mouth.

How tender!

He had imagined that the tendon would be tough, so he was quite surprised at how tender it was. Despite this, the flavours of the meat hadn't disappeared. Rather than calling it a soup, it was more of a seasoned sauce that matched the meat quite well.

Then, this konnyaku.

It was just jiggling, but its texture was interesting. When he put it into his mouth with the meat, he couldn't help but enjoy it.

"When the weather is cold, it makes you want to eat gyusuji doteyaki, doesn't it?"

Shinobu didn't pour his usual mug of lager, "Toriezu Nama," but rather, some sake in a small bisque cup. A fragrant aroma rose from its colourless, transparent contents. The cup was a little hot when he held it in his hand. When he brought it to his lips to test it, a refreshing taste washed over his mouth.

"It goes well with atsukan, doesn't it?"

"This alcohol is called... atsukan?"

(TL: atsukan = hot sake)

She had also named the brand, but he had never heard of "Aizu Homare" or "Ide" before. The strange-sounding names gave off a foreign feeling. He ate the doteyaki and drank the hot sake. With just this, joy spread from the bottom of his heart.

"Please teach me. This meat is beef tendon, right? If so, how is it possible to boil it until it's this tender?"

The one who answered wasn't Shinobu, but the shopkeeper in the kitchen.

"I have been simmering it for three days."

Three days.

The revelation made him feel dizzy.

This was a pub, not the kitchens of the Imperial Court. It was also the shopkeeper of this pub who was standing there, not the head chef for the nobles and royalty.

Even so, three days.

Isaac couldn't say anything at the degree of enthusiasm given to accomplish this dish. It wasn't only the amount of time used, but the costs of the charcoal and firewood as well. He might not be up to the task.

Still, this taste.

The shopkeeper simmered the meat for that long in order to achieve this taste.

Nobody could laugh it off as a foolish endeavour.

On the contrary, Isaac wondered how such a delicious dish could be made in such a short time.

"Goodness gracious! I give up. To be honest, I intended to leave after figuring out how to copy the taste, but how would I do that? It doesn't seem to be easily achieved."

"It's because the preparation for the meat in doteyaki is tedious. After simmering it for

three days to soften it, I boil it to let the flavours seep into the meat, and then I let it rest overnight.”

“There’s that, too. Adjusting the flavour is difficult as well, isn’t it?”

“We are fortunate to have somebody with an excellent tongue.”

When the store owner looked at Shinobu, she happily stuck out her tongue. It was a store with a warm atmosphere. Isaac definitely wanted to be a regular customer.

“That being said, it seems that there’s still a long way to go for me to understand the dishes of the Old Capital (Aiteria).”

“In that case, I’ll introduce you to some stores that stay open in the afternoon. There are stores open at night, but don’t you think you can gain more knowledge by trying out various food in the afternoon too?”

“I would be grateful.”

At this time, the inns and pubs of the Old Capital (Aiteria) were devoting themselves to developing new dishes for the Grand Bazaar. Isaac felt that these events would only benefit this store, and that they had nothing to lose.

After telling the store owner about the stores he recommended, Isaac was seized by an irresistible urge.

“By the way, Shinobu-san, I have a request.”

“W-What is it?”

Shinobu flinched at Isaac’s serious face and straightened her back.

“May I... have another bowl of gyusuji doteyaki? If possible, make it a large serving. Also, another atsukan, please.”

“Sure!”

He wondered what kind of poem Arnoux would recite while eating the dishes here. Strangely, eating gyusuji doteyaki made him want to listen to that unskillful poetry of his.

Chapter 56

Dashimaki Tamago (Part 1)

“What is the meaning of this, Baron?”

Just as Izakaya Nobu opened for the day, two customers arrived at the store.

One of them had been to Nobu before, and had been quite the troublesome customer. It was Baron Branton.

He was a noble who possessed territory near the Old Capital (Aiteria) and was a big fan of card games.

He was also the noble who had unreasonably demanded to reserve Izakaya Nobu for an entire night, but went home after relishing a delicious pork sandwich that Shinobu had made for her employee meal.

However, the other person was a mystery.

Shinobu did not recognise the grey-haired old man who was speaking to the Baron with superficial courtesy.

He was dressed beautifully and was holding a small, round object that looked like a guitar under his arm. Shinobu did not know what that man's job was.

“When I heard that I would be treated by the famous gourmet Baron, I dropped everything to come all the way here from the capital, but to think that the feast would be at a pub. I did not realise that I had offended the Baron's feelings to the extent that he would write up an invitation to plot such an elaborate revenge? “

“That's not it. That's not it at all, Crowvinkel.”

As soon as the name Crowvinkel was uttered, Guild Master Godhardt and Arnoux, who both happened to be present, turned around.

One would think that the two were acquainted with each other, but Shinobu concluded that it wasn't the case, as a Water Transportation Guild Master and a prodigal son shouldn't have many mutual acquaintances.

“The food here is wonderful, Crowvinkel. I believe you remember the uproar during Miss Hildegarde's wedding ceremony that day.”

“Was it the “Ankake Yudofu” incident? From what I can remember, I more or less concluded that it was just an imaginary dish thought up by the young lass, since there wasn’t a dish like that in the Eastern Kingdom. Did something new happen around Baron Branton’s surroundings after that?”

“Crowvinkel, it’s this store. This was the store that served the ‘ankake yudofu’. I also like this place.”

Branton praised Izakaya Nobu with exaggerated hand gestures.

However, Godhardt and Arnoux didn’t seem interested in it. They repeatedly glanced towards the other man, as if he was a celebrity and they were making sure that he really was Crowvinkel.

“What! That shop really existed? Even though so many of the Empire’s nobles searched for it and failed... it is commendable that Baron Branton actually managed to find it. I deeply regret my terrible impoliteness for my misunderstanding just now.”

“No, it’s alright. More importantly, it would feel bad to come to a bar and not eat or drink anything. Let’s order right away.”

“Yeah, Yeah, Let’s do just that.”

Branton gracefully raised his hand and called out to Shinobu, who had already finished placing down the hand towel and serving the appetizer.

“Can I get two ‘Toriaezu Nama’?”

“Sure, two orders of ‘Nama’ coming.”

She felt elated that he had done his research on the store before coming.

The last time he came, he had paid one gold coin for just a pork cutlet sandwich, so she thought that he might be a surprisingly playful noble.

“Well then, I’ll have whatever you recommend. If possible, something hot.”

“Sure. Something hot, huh.”

“Though it isn’t necessary to say in advance, please make it delicious. After all, it will

enter the mouth of this minstrel, Crowvinkel here.”

“Oh.”

When Shinobu heard the word “minstrel”, something flashed through her mind. By the way, wasn’t the name of the poet Godhardt liked also Crowvinkel? Also, Arnoux had said that he would aim to become just like Crowvinkel. That was probably why those two had been looking over here with sparkling puppy eyes

Shinobu turned around to tell this to Nobuyuki, but it seemed that he had already noticed.

He didn’t say anything and tried to contain his smile while working hard to prepare the dishes for the two gourmets.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Hoh, this is...”

Nobuyuki chose to serve oyster gratin for their orders.

Normally, Nobuyuki didn’t make fancy dishes, but when he did, he made oysters.

In addition to the flesh of the oyster, the oyster gratin preserved the flavour of the oyster by pouring the white sauce onto the oyster shell itself.

Oyster gratin



Not only did it look fancy, it also tasted good. He had a feeling that if it was left to Shinobu's tastes, the seasoning would end up close to the what people in the Old Capital were used to, but in the end, it was only a matter of preference. How would the two gourmets judge this?

"Using the shell of the gun shellfish to serve gratin, this is quite fascinating. There was a chef who had a similar train of thought at an inn in the Eastern Kingdom, but it was just hollowing out a watermelon and serving fruit with molasses in it. That was interesting, but this is quite splendid. "

"The taste is also quite good, Crowvinkel. The temperature of the gun shellfish is just right."

Branton, who had eaten two mouthfuls of the gratin, was starting on his next oyster. He was gracefully picking up the oyster shell with his long fingers. His actions were refined indeed.

On the other hand, Crowvinkel was deep in thought about something as he let his first oyster sit in his mouth.

"Ex-excuse me, was it not to your liking?"

Even though Shinobu asked unintentionally, Crowvinkel didn't reply.

He simply tasted the gratin, closed his eyes, and let out a small sigh.

This kind of customer was unusual.

This behaviour reminded her of an undercover examiner who had come to Ryotei Yukitsuna.

"I see."

Unlike the previously talkative Crowvinkel, he only made a single remark before putting his beer mug to his mouth.

She couldn't tell if he was satisfied or not from his expression.

"How was it, Crowvinkel? Wasn't it wonderful?"

"That is so, Baron."

"What's wrong? Did you not like the gratin?"

“No, that isn’t the case.”

Crowvinkel cleared his throat slightly and stared at Nobuyuki.

Nobuyuki also turned around to face him.

The minstrel and chef locked eyes, appraising each other.

It was Crowvinkel, who began to talk first.

“This is very delicious, but this isn’t the normal flavour. Am I wrong?”

“It is as you said...”

Nobuyuki bowed respectfully.

In this situation, Nobuyuki didn’t want to lie. The head chef from Yukitsuna, Tonoharu, had properly taught him that.

“I have strong faith in Baron Branton’s tongue. If it is the shop that he recommends, I want to enjoy all the cooking secrets of this shop.”

When he said that, Shinobu was troubled.

The pork cutlet sandwich that was used to placate the Baron previously was made by Shinobu,

However, if she opened her mouth here, things would get complicated, so she kept quiet.

“I have a request for the store owner. Please let me eat the dish that you have the most confidence in, right now.”

“I understand.”

“If the taste satisfies me, I suppose I would be willing to grant a request of yours.”

Chapter 57

Dashimaki Tamago (Part 2)

Nobuyuki's eyes became unusually stern.

It was understandable. The oyster gratin was a masterpiece, but it was said that it didn't reflect his truly desired taste.

Certainly, Shinobu noticed that the flavor of Nobuyuki's food had been slightly off recently.

If Nobuyuki's teacher, Tonoharu, was present, he might've been scolded relentlessly.

After going to Shinobu for taste-testing, the flavors slowly settled bit by bit, but there were times when he needed a new idea to blend the flavors nicely.

Shinobu knew that he was trying to break out of his own shell.

As the daughter of a ryotei family, Shinobu also knew that no one could give him a solution.

This had also been noticed by Crowvinkel.

Wouldn't everyone agree if she called him a true gourmet?

It seemed like the customers had also begun to notice the bizarre atmosphere coming from the kitchen, especially Godhardt and Arnoux, both of whom had watched the events unfold with bated breaths. They seemed interested in what the minstrel Crowinkel, whom they admired, would do.

What would Nobuyuki make? Even Shinobu had no idea. The order was "the dish that you're most confident in".

Even though it was tasty and was made of excellent ingredients, he couldn't afford to serve an original dish to the people of the Old Capital. It was truly a dish that you had to have the most confidence in.

Just because such a thing was ordered so suddenly didn't mean that it could be prepared swiftly.

Nobuyuki began to mix the eggs.

There were various dishes that used eggs, both fancy and simplistic ones.

What kind of dish would Nobuyuki create? Everyone in the pub was focused on the kitchen.

Naturally, Crowvinkel was the one who was watching him with the most anticipation.

Branton, who had brought the minstrel, was speaking with Arnoux for some reason. They had probably struck up a conversation because they were both fans of the minstrel.

The pub was quiet, and only the sound of Nobuyuki lightly mixing the egg could be heard.

It was dashimaki tamago. That was Shinobu's hunch.

Lately, Nobuyuki had been meticulously paying attention to the way he was adjusting the dashi.

The meal that he was most confident in currently was the dashi itself, so of course he would pick dashimaki to serve to Crowvinkel.

Shinobu tightened her apron and headed for the cabinets.

Which plate would be best to make the dashimaki look more delicious?

When she had been at home, Yukitsuna, she could choose any plate and use it, but there wasn't as much variety in Izakaya Nobu.

Even after closer investigation, there was naturally still a difference in the quality of the plates between the two locations. Still, she wanted to choose a suitable plate to serve the dish that Nobuyuki had the most confidence in, with her own hands.

The thick, beaten egg made a sizzling sound on the pan that was used to roll dashimaki.

As expected of Nobuyuki's, he rolled up the egg just by twisting his wrists.

In the blink of an eye, a dashimaki, made from three eggs, had been rolled up and placed on a bamboo sushi mat.

Since it made using Yukitsuna's method, where plenty of dashi were made, if you didn't shape it with a bamboo mat, the dashimaki would crumble.

"It's done."

The light yellow dashimaki looked great when placed on the green plate that Shinobu had selected.

Crowvinkel, who had watched Nobuyuki cook with folded arms, slowly picked up the fork.



Dashimaki Tamago

“Choosing to serve an omelette without any toppings, it seems that you are a brave chef.

From the careful selection of the ingredients and controlling the fire yourself, to the skills in preparing the food, all of it converged into creating this dish. This is definitely the best way to display your abilities. But, will I be satisfied with this?”

When Crowvinkel’s fork made contact with it, the dashimaki appeared to engulf it. It crumbled, but there was no resistance. It had been perfectly cooked.

While wearing a strange look on his face, the old minstrel brought the dashimaki to his mouth.

Silence.

No one in Izakaya Nobu dared to utter a word.

They were simply waiting to hear the minstrel’s impressions.



“Magical...”

However, only one word escaped his lips

Crowvinkel then returned to enjoying the rest of the dashimaki. Before he knew it, the top of the plate looked as if it had been licked clean.

There was a complicated atmosphere in the air.

They had been anticipating some kind of eloquent praise to come from the minstrel’s mouth, but they had only gotten a single word.

This was especially the case for the three people, Branton, Godhardt, and Arnoux, who were staring at Crowvinkel as he was wiping his mouth.

“Store owner, as promised, I will grant you a request. That being said, the request has to be within my power to fulfill.”

Crowvinkel, who had wiped his mouth clean, looked cheerful. Shinobu had witnessed that kind of face before, countless times.

It was the face of somebody satisfied by a delicious meal.

“Thank you very much. Then, there’s something that I would like to ask for.”

“What is it? I can’t imagine what a chef like you would request of me.”

“Could you please examine Arnoux’s verses, over there?”

Nobuyuki’s request was unexpected.

Arnoux, who was suddenly mentioned, abruptly stood up and made a confused but joyous expression. In contrast, Godhardt, who was beside him, looked mortified.

“Is that okay, store owner? It wouldn’t be difficult for me to spread the splendor of this place to the Empire. On the contrary, it would also be possible to set up a store ten times bigger than this one inside the capital.”

“No, just your thanks is enough. It was fate that allowed me to open a shop here. I’m not planning on moving somewhere else currently.”

“Fate, you say? I see... Then, I’ll look at this lucky Arnoux-kun’s verses. Meanwhile, please steam the gun shellfish with wine. Of course, if there’s a tastier way to eat it, that’ll be fine too.”

That evening, a modest feast with a calm atmosphere was held until the end of the day. Everyone enjoyed Crowvinkel's singing and his lute, and there were servings of fried oysters, beef doteyaki, and a huge amount of tempura paired with beer and sake.

Crowvinkel kept his promise and read Arnoux's verses thoroughly, but it was decided that he would send a letter about how to improve them at a later date.

"I will make sure that letters from Arnoux-kun of Sachnussenburg receive the highest priority. If you send them through Baron Branton, they will reach me properly."

After saying this, Crowvinkel left the store as the roosters began to crow. An amulet was hanging around the helplessly drunk Arnoux's neck. The blue gem gave off a brilliant gleam.

Chapter 58

Chawanmushi (Part 1)

The light rain that had started falling before dusk had soaked Inns & Stables Street. A young torchbearer had been continuously pacing back and forth in front of Izakaya Nobu and its signboard the whole time.

Enrico Bellardino. He was one of the confidants who served the archbishop.

When he was young, he had been known as an outstanding priest, and he was well known in the Holy Order as someone who supported the Archbishop's traditionalist view and kept his distance from the Holy Kingdom.

Enrico was observing Izakaya Nobu because of a tip off.

'Izakaya Nobu is the witches' lair.'

Recently, a short man called Damien had brought this information to the Archbishop, who Enrico was close with.

Even though he had thought that the man would be snobbish, like the boss of thugs, the man had surprisingly been a refined person. The Archbishop had decided to use him, since it was convenient and his pawns didn't have to decrease.

"Could there really be a witch?"

As a traditionalist, it was important that witches existed.

By hunting witches in this land, he could prove that the Holy Order was corrupt and force it to revert to following the ancient teachings.

If they went back to the ancient teachings, the wicked would disappear immediately.

That was why Enrico's responsibilities were important.

He had to make sure that witches really gathered at this bar.

He had been exposed to the rain for quite some time now, but he still had not found any clues.

He did not think that the witches would reveal their identities that easily, but he was currently in a stalemate.

It was dangerous for him to stay here for a long time.

Considering the situation was like this, he pulled the glass door open. At that moment, Enrico was wrapped in a mysterious warmth.

“Welcome!”

“...elcome.”

After being drenched under the cold rain alone, hearing the greetings comforted him.

“I definitely won’t be deceived,” Enrico muttered under his breath.

The lovely waitress, the young dishwasher girl, and the girl wiping the table who looked to be newly wedded... all of them could be witches. Even the male store owner could potentially be a witch.

According to the witch hunting legends, male witches weren’t uncommon.

He would not be deceived.

Once he had settled down by the counter, a warm cloth and some appetizers were brought out without his prompting. They seemed to be called oshibori and otoshi respectively.

He was grateful for the hospitality, as his hands were wet and frozen to the bone. Was this possibly a strategy to lower his guard before creeping into the depths of his mind?

“What would you like to order?”

“Warm, plain water... I’m not fond of alcohol.”

After he said that, he regretted it.

Would a torchbearer say that?

Enrico, who had dedicated himself to asceticism for a long time, had entered a bar for the first time today. Would they lashed out at him for his impoliteness in entering a bar and not ordering alcohol?

This sort of anxiety gradually grew within him.

However, that sort of anxiety seemed to merely be a groundless fear.

The waitress smiled and brought out some plain water in a porcelain cup.

When he wrapped his hands around it, its warmth gradually melted his frozen hands.

The appetizer was nitsuke kozakana.

Even though Enrico wasn’t used to eating food with a strong flavor, the small sweet and simmered fish strangely suited his palate.

He wanted to request the same thing again, but he suppressed the desire with the self-restraint of a stone statue sculpture.

‘Attachment is corruption, and corruption is the fall of faith.’ While he warmed his body up with the warm plain water, he secretly examined the store.

This really was a witches’ lair, wasn’t it.

There were strange decorations and furniture that he had never seen before, not even in records, occupying various places in the store.

The menu was written in a foreign language, and there were colorful sake bottles and models of ships in bottles.

In particular, he was able to sense a strong energy coming from the altar of a foreign god, which was enshrined on the wall in the inner part of the store.

There was a rational reason why the upright Enrico, who had never set foot in a bar before, was chosen to go investigate this store.

He was able to sense the energies of this world.

However, it was neither an evil energy nor a holy energy.

Various energies beyond the power of man filled up naturally, and it was always transforming.

In truth, even if there were priests who had undergone strict training, the number of people who were able to sense energies could be counted with one hand.

That was why the mission assigned to Enrico was important.

“Would you like to order something?”

Although the waitress from a short while ago came and asked, Enrico couldn’t answer. Come to think of it, he did not know what was served at this kind of store.

When he had been undergoing the traditionalist faction’s rigorous training under the Archbishop, his meals had been modest and consisted of bread, stew, and wine diluted with water. The most they had gotten for dessert was some pudding.

They had hardly consumed meat or fish; rather they had paid more importance to vegetables.

“Something... to warm myself up.”

He thought it was a dumb order after he said it.

However, the waitress unexpectedly nodded with a smile.

Had the disguise of being a torchbearer fooled them into thinking that he was a young man who was unfamiliar with this kind of store? Anyway, it was a good thing that they didn’t seem to suspect him.

Fortunately, no suspicious gazes had been directed at him yet. He couldn't be careless. There were strong possibility that this place, which was filled with paganistic beliefs, was the witches' lair. However, Enrico was not able to declare that the strange energy he sensed from the pagan altar was an evil one.

"Sorry for the wait, this is chawanmushi!"

"Thank you."

He received the bowl and was nearly overwhelmed by the waitress' bright smile. The dish called chawanmushi seemed to be a pudding with other ingredients inside of it. The name sounded exotic, but if that was the case, then it was something he was familiar with.

Besides, this pudding with ingredients would be the perfect tool to judge whether or not this place was the witches' lair.

Chapter 59

Chawanmushi (Part 2)

Enrico listened to the voice that filled the world as he faced the chawanmushi. From what he understood, this world was filled with wonders and miracles. Even if he didn't think much about how celestial bodies like the sun and moon worked, God's profound love made every day possible.

Therefore, the ingredients that made up this pudding were all filled with God's grace. The order in which the ingredients inside revealed themselves would allow him to predict the will of God.

This talent was one of the works of God he had acquired after undergoing long and arduous training.

It was a respectable form of divination.

Just like sliding a copper coin on letters written on parchment paper or astrology, this method of divination was recorded in the ancient documents of the Holy Order.

Recently, this antiquated divination method was considered outdated, due to Hürghigegot pushing forward his reformation, but the Archbishop highly valued Enrico's work of God.

He took the wooden spoon in his hands and cleared his mind.

All unnecessary distractions were discarded, leaving only the presence of the chawanmushi in front of him.

When the water's surface in his mind had calmed down completely, Enrico asked himself a question.

(The Holy Order... what kind of existence would be ideal?)

When he slowly dipped the wooden spoon into the chawanmushi, he touched something.

This, this was his answer.

He slowly scooped it out; it was a small, jiggly, white food item in the shape of a semi-circle. Its edges were dyed pink.

“That is kamaboko. It’s a kind of fish paste.”

The waitress called out to him from outside of his concentration.

Her voice sounded distorted, as if he was listening to her while submerged in water.

Kamaboko.

This semicircle represented one half of the world.

Indeed. According to the ancient teachings, the Holy Order was the religion of the world, and other matters were entrusted to emperors and kings.

He wanted to move on to his next question, but for that, it would be necessary for him to empty the spoon.

In order to not be suspected as a spy, he should at least pretend to eat it. This is what he was thinking as he brought the spoon to his mouth.

However, Enrico then nearly dropped the spoon by accident.

It was delicious.

The silky smoothness and fluffiness was delicious.

It was completely different from the tasteless pudding served in the monastery.

This kamaboko was also good. He had never eaten anything with this kind of chewy texture before.

The overwhelmingly dense and rich substance went hand in hand with its flavour. Could such a dish exist in this world?

No, this must be some sort of witchcraft.

He was about to scoop up the next mouthful, but he restrained himself.

‘No, this is wrong. This is a conversation, an interrogation.’

‘Don’t be distracted. Don’t get drawn in by the witches’ tricks.’

In order to calm his mind, he asked his usual questions.

(God’s presence, what does it look like?)

He inserted the spoon again while praying in his mind.

Then, he hit something else. It looked like a leafy vegetable.

While he was thinking about what was on the spoon, he stared at it in detail, as there was something unbelievable there.

“That’s mitsuba, right?”

(TL note: mitsuba = japanese parsley / three leaves)

Mitsuba. There were three leaves, but at the same time, there was only one. It appeared as if it were representing the three states of God.

This conversation had been a success. If that was the case, then he should be able to investigate this store without any problems.

However, before that, a bite.

It was not because he wanted to eat it, it was just to empty the spoon. It was certainly not the case that he had succumbed to his desires.

Munch.

When he held it in his mouth, he realised that this leafy vegetable hadn't just been steamed.

It had also been parboiled once earlier, and it appeared to be seasoned as well. Otherwise, it couldn't taste this good.

It didn't just taste good, however; it was delicious.

Why was it so delicious?

This caused Enrico's mind to waver.

Was it really alright to ask the next question, "Is this the witches' lair?"?

If he got the answer that it really was the witches' lair, Enrico, as someone related to the ministry, would have to leave this place immediately.

When that happened, what would become of the rest of the chawanmushi?

Since it would be a customer's leftovers, wouldn't it be thrown away?

That would be really regrettable.

Was there a way to finish the chawanmushi?

There was.

He would issue the question on the last bite of the chawanmushi.

If he did that, assuming this was the witches' lair, he could leave after finishing the chawanmushi.

Whenever he asked a question, the spoon found an ingredient.

A chicken that told the time. A lily bulb that demonstrated that what was important thing wasn't the content, but the act of questioning things. Even a ginkgo seed that remained unbroken through the eternal passing of time.

In any case, a satisfactory answer for each question could be derived from the

ingredients.

It was also delicious.

Before he had noticed, there was only one spoonful left in the bowl.

Even though he was reluctant, Enrico asked the final question.

(Is this store the witches' lair?)

If it was the witches' lair, it should contain an ingredient pointing towards it.

However, there was only the jiggling, pure chawanmushi on the spoon.

The result of the divination was: innocent.

Enrico came to that conclusion as he licked the last spoonful of the chawanmushi.

Could it be that this place wasn't really the witches' lair?

Certainly, when he observed this harmonious atmosphere, it was hard to believe that this was a garden of heresy.

Originally, the information that this store was suspicious had only come from Damien.

It was important for the traditionalist faction to have a witch in the Old Capital, but it didn't necessarily have to be this store.

Besides, this chawanmushi was delicious.

Should he ask for another chawanmushi so that his divination would be more accurate?

While he was thinking that, Enrico felt a strong gaze from behind.

It wasn't from a person.

While trembling, he turned around to look, but there was no one there.

There was only the enshrined pagan altar.

"Mister, is there anything wrong with the household shrine (kamidana)?"

There was definitely something living in the altar that the waitress called kamidana.

It wasn't evil. It was something of a holy nature, but it was outside of the limits of Enrico's imagination.

"Th-thank you for the meal!"

Enrico took some silver coins out of his pocket and handed them over to the waitress before rushing out into the night of the Old Capital, back into the autumn rain.

What witches' lair?

There was a high-ranking sacred beast, probably something like a fox spirit, guarding the store. It was impossible for witches and the like to step into it. While carrying his unbearable desire and an unsatisfied stomach, Enrico racked his brains on what to report to the Archbishop.

Chapter 60

Stewed Hamburger Steak (Part 1)

Even during Aiteria's rainy autumn season, there still was the occasional clear and sunny day.

It could rain at any moment, but it was still a welcome change.

Around here, such days were called "winter preparation days", and people would go out to collect firewood and mend roofs.

Eva was more enthusiastic than usual, as there was no need to clean up the store.

Even though it was such a nice day, in Izakaya Nobu, there was a drunk customer who had been grumbling away with a beer mug in hand since morning.

It was Arnoux.

He had been muttering the same complaints over and over, while holding a bundle of parchment paper in his hands.

"Arnoux-san, isn't that enough for now?"

"Shinobu-san, this is just the first cup. Only the first cup."

Even though he said that, Shinobu was already knew.

Although he protested strongly, Arnoux was a lightweight, and he had already gotten drunk after three gulps from that first mug of beer.

When she saw him pitifully trudging along Inns & Stables Street, she had called out to him and invited him in, but she hadn't realized that he was in such a terrible condition. The cause was the letter that he had received from the minstrel, Crowvinkel.

"I was told that different people have different talents."

Although she hadn't listened to Arnoux's grumbling completely, the minstrel's impressions had apparently been written out quite bluntly.

Nobuyuki stayed silent, cooking his sauce in a saucepan, but he seemed troubled.

Shinobu and Nobuyuki, who were Japanese, could not understand Arnoux's

lackadaisical verses.

However, the verses from the old minstrel called Crowvinkel, who liked the dashimaki tamago, were beautiful and made an impression on them.

Compared to that, Arnoux's verses seemed somewhat lacking.

"What did Crowvinkel-san say?"

When Shinobu couldn't put up with it any longer and called out to him, Arnoux gave a slight nod.

Seeing him this depressed made the Arnoux who had beat up the thugs seem like an illusion.

"You know your language well. Your choice of phonemes is also not bad. Your depth of knowledge on the format of old songs is also surprisingly good. However, it lacks the essential flair, the fundamental part of a poem, which comes from the realm of talents, and is hard to overcome with effort," was what he said.

"How did you respond, Arnoux-san?"

"I said, 'From now on, I will live my life while banging my head into the wall.'"

After she heard that, Shinobu barely stopped herself from bursting out into laughter.

"It's not a laughing matter, Shinobu-san. I really want to become a minstrel."

"Even though you were told it was difficult?"

"According to teacher Crowvinkel, my poetry is a form of escape. He can see that I run to my writing whenever I turn my eyes away from whatever I have to do. That great teacher seems to have seen through this habit of mine. He truly is a wonderful teacher."

That old minstrel sure had a dreadful character.

With only two mouthfuls of a dish, he had been able to see through Nobuyuki's hesitation.

Ever since that incident, Nobuyuki had stopped serving the dishes that he had invented in the store.

Even dishes that looked eccentric were prepared carefully, and he did not serve it to people until he was satisfied with the taste.

The final verdict was left to Shinobu.

It seemed that Nobuyuki had decided that, in order for Izakaya Nobu to keep existing in Aiteria, he had to place more emphasis on honing his skills, rather than his curiosity as a chef.

One of the reasons was undoubtedly that old man, though something else might have happened without Shinobu's knowledge.

"So, what are you going to do now?"

Rather than words, Arnoux replied with the sound of beer washing down his throat.

It was said that there are days when you just want to drown in alcohol.

Shinobu made a small shrug. Isaac would probably come to pick him up later.

When the fragrance from Nobuyuki's pot began to drift through the air, the glass door was timidly opened.

Two cute customers peeked in.

"I-is this Big Sis Eva's store?!"

"Izzit?!"

"Yes, that's right. Welcome."

"...elcome."

"Welcome!"

Eva joined in on today's usual greetings.

As expected, these two customers were Eva's younger brother and sister. Their names were Adolf and Angelica.

Like Eva, both of them had red hair, and they were dressed up for today.

Nobuyuki and Shinobu had heard from two mercenaries that Eva had bought clothes with her wages.

These two hadn't come to play.

They probably wanted to show gratitude for the presents their older sister had given them. Even though Shinobu thought he was mature for a child who only looked to be around the age of ten, it was possible that this was common in this world.

The six-year-old Angelica was still carrying a stuffed toy, but her big eyes sparkled

with curiosity. She would definitely grow up to be smart, just like Eva.

“This is a little something from... no, this is our gratitude for helping our elder sister. Please eat it.”

“Pwease!”

Adolf said as he handed over a sack containing a somewhat small apple and some potatoes.

Even though the potatoes, which still had some soil on it, were smaller than the ones in Japan, they still had some weight to them.

“Thank you very much. I will gratefully receive this.”

Shinobu didn’t speak to them like they were children, but as if they were adults instead.

When they handed over the sack of potatoes, Nobuyuki leaked out a voice of admiration.

“I see you’ve properly put in an apple.”

Putting potatoes and apples together in a sack improved preservation. It seemed like this kind of knowledge was common in both Aiteria and Japan.

“Now then, please come here, dear guests.”

Eva was the one to guide them.

Was it because she wanted to show her workplace to her siblings? Eva was even more enthusiastic than usual. Since the counter chairs were tall, it was evident that the other customers were watching to see if Angelica would need any help to sit on it.

“Ah, but we only came to say thank you.”

Eva forced the panicking Adolf to sit down.

“There is no way I’m letting you go without rewarding you after you came to say thank you.”

Shinobu left serving the customers to Big Sis Eva and went to check on the potatoes

that she had received.

Its shape was closer to the May Queen variety, rather than the Baron variety. While the Baron was soft and flaky, the May Queen didn't crumble easily, even after it was boiled. She wouldn't know which variety they were closer too until they were cooked.

(TL note: The Baron/Danshaku potato is also known as the Irish cobbler potato)

"Taisho, can you make something with these potatoes that we've been gifted?"

Shinobu asked Nobuyuki while covering the dead drunk Arnoux with a towel blanket, but it seemed like he was thinking the same thing.

"That's right. Since it is a special occasion, how about we use it as a garnish?"

Chapter 61

Stewed Hamburger Steak (Part 2)

A soft bubbling sound could be heard coming from the boiling pot.

Nobuyuki was making stewed hamburger steak.

The hamburger steak was baked and slowly stewed in a thick, demi-glace sauce.

The three of them, including Eva, had discussed what to serve their guests. They had decided on a meat dish, in consideration of the growing Adolf's appetite.

This was a dish that Nobuyuki was used to making.

The stewed hamburger steak was one of the special dishes served at Ryotei Yukitsuna, his former workplace, during the Christmas season every year.

The trick to Tonoharu's secret hamburger recipe, was to thoroughly stew the hamburger steak until it was tender, so that children and the elderly could easily eat it.

The two customers were obediently sitting down, enthralled by how quickly Nobuyuki cut the potatoes.

They stared with their eyes as wide as dinner plates; it was as if they were seeing magic.

"If you cut it so quickly, won't you accidentally cut your finger?"

"When I was an apprentice, I did cut myself a few times. I'm already used to it now though."

Nobuyuki was surprisingly friendly when the other party were children, and he sliced the potatoes into easy-to-eat pieces while talking.

He was probably going to make french fries, based on how he began to crush cloves of garlic while heating up oil. They were addictive.

Potatoes fried together with garlic chips were delicious, but as someone in the service industry, Shinobu couldn't eat them unless she had the next day off.

The younger Angelica was more interested in Eva's movements, rather than Nobuyuki's skills, and her gaze followed Eva around the room.

The potatoes started crackling and made a pleasant sound once they were immersed in the oil, and that, along with the salt mill on the counter, seemed to catch their attention. Adolf examined and hit it the mill repeatedly.

“Your siblings are so cute, aren’t they?”

“I’m so sorry. I feel embarrassed.”

Eva looked like she was torn between standing on one side of the store, or next to her siblings as she hid her blushing cheeks with a tray.

Shinobu was envious, as her relationship with her brothers wasn’t that good.

“Now then, thank you for waiting.”

When Nobuyuki served the dish, they cheered joyfully.

The hamburger steak that was soaked in a thick sauce gave off a delicious aroma. Shinobu, who had taste-tested the prototype, recalled the taste and broke into a smile.

The stewed hamburger steak was so tender that you could eat it with a spoon instead of a knife and fork.

The french fries, which had been roughly cut, were served on the side with toothpicks. He had made it so that the children could easily eat it, but it might have been a little impolite to Adolf, who was more mature than he had thought.

The two broke apart the hamburger steak with a spoon, scooped some up with the demi-glace sauce, and brought it to their mouths.

Both of their eyes opened wide.

“It’s delicious!”

“Delishious!”

It was probably their first time eating stewed meat that was this tender.

Although Nobuyuki had made it smaller, so that it wouldn’t crumble on itself, Adolf made short work of the hamburger steak in only two mouthfuls, and had started on the next one.

Angelica, who was trying her best to use the spoon, had caused the hamburger steak to crumble.

Eva immediately lending Angelica a hand was the perfect image of a caring, elder sister. It was probably just as harmonious at their home.

Anybody would feel touched inside when they saw someone eating something so voraciously, especially if it was a child.

The people of Aiteria often laughed while eating.

Seeing these smiling faces was probably the reason why Shinobu continued to work at Izakaya Nobu.

“Shinobu-chan as well, here.”

Adolf was holding out one of the french fries made by frying the potatoes he had brought. Of course, there wasn't any garlic chips on it.

When she took a bite, the taste was unexpectedly strong.

Its texture was similar to the May Queen, but the sticky texture also somewhat reminded her of taro.

It was a taste that would cause one to naturally smile.

Depending on the method of cooking, it might improve even further.

“What do you think?”

“This tuber... I think it'll be delicious if you boil it. For example...”

“Nikujaga?”

(TL Note: Nikujaga = Meat and Potato Stew)

Shinobu nodded vigorously while taking another bite of the french fry.

With the potatoes grown from Eva's home and Nobuyuki's dashi, it might be possible to make a fairly delicious Nikujaga.

Angelica, whose mouth was being wiped clean by Eva after it had become sticky, strangely muttered.

“Big sis, is this really a witch's shop?”

There was a light smacking noise, and Angelica started to cry.

Adolf had hit her on her head.

“Don’t say these kinds of things!”

“Adolf!”

This time, Eva scolded Adolf.

A witch’s shop.

She knew some who called this place that.

A regular customer had said it as a joke. It also didn’t happen only once or twice.

Since she did not understand why, she didn’t think about it very much.

However, when even a small child like Angelica knew about this rumour, she somehow felt that it was strange.

The story about there being a witch in Aiteria was being talked about like it was a fact. She had even met said person.

It might not be a very good sign that such a story was spreading around.

“Angelica, who did you hear that rumour from?”

“Everyone says it. That Izakaya Nobu is a witch’s shop.”

Adolf tried to smack Angelica’s head again, and Eva caught his wrist. While watching the situation, Shinobu was idly thinking about something else.

About the store.

About life in Aiteria.

And about the witch.

She didn’t exactly understand what kinds of rumours were being spread, but it was probably okay as long as it wasn’t a bad one.

Shinobu just wanted to watch people feeling happy while eating delicious things.

In order to soothe Angelica, who was half sobbing, she took out the pudding that was meant for dessert from the refrigerator.

Ingrid’s and Camilla’s portions had already been put aside.

Ingrid often went bar hopping with Arnoux recently. It seemed to be the kind of relationship where Ingrid listened to Arnoux’s complaints about not being accepted by Crowvinkel.

He might be a good conversation partner for Ingrid, who had just came over to Aiteria

and had few acquaintances.

When Ingrid came yesterday, that amulet had been hanging around her neck. It had probably played its part and been relieved of its duty.

“Thank you for the food!”

“Thanks, food!”

It wasn’t even necessary to wash the pudding container, as it had been completely cleaned out.

Both of them had sweet tooth, after all.

“Shinobu-san, I’m sorry. Is this enough?”

The apologetic Adolf opened a pouch, which was crammed with copper coins, on the counter.

It was probably their saved up pocket money or tips.

“It’s okay for today. I enjoyed serving you two.”

“But...”

Eva gently took the pouch from Adolf, who was hesitating, and stuffed it into his pocket.

“You need to learn how to receive people’s goodwill. Properly say thank you to Taisho-san and Shinobu-san.”

“Thank you very much for today.”

“Thankiu!”

When she saw the two politely bow, Shinobu smiled along with Nobuyuki.

The gentle autumn day slowly went by with everyone’s smiling faces.

Chapter 62

The Witch and the Archbishop (Part 1)

The witch hunt had begun.

This rumour started to spread one drizzling autumn evening.

People witnessed a carriage with the Archbishop's crest carrying people out of the alleys of Aiteria, one after another. The shadows of passersby became sparse, and even thugs were nowhere to be seen.

It wasn't just one or two people who had disappeared. There were rumours that more than ten people had already been transported to an empty residence in the outskirts of Aiteria.

Even though the Grand Bazaar festival was drawing near, Aiteria was enveloped in a strange atmosphere.

"You had better be careful too, Shinobu-chan."

Lorentz, the glass smith, said as he tilted his mug. There was a bruise around his eye that was said to have been caused by his son, Hans, during a big fight.

It was amazing enough to fight with Hans, who had been drilled by Berthold in the sentry corps, but it was even more amazing that it had resulted in a draw.

The appetites of the parent and child had probably been ignited after not fighting for a long time.

The warm, wet hand towel cooled down as he ate a tempura appetizer and drank seven glasses of beer.

"Be careful of... the witch hunt?"

"Yes, yes. There are rumours that it's being done at random."

Shinobu placed her finger on her chin to think while secretly controlling Lorentz, who was demanding his eighth cup.

'What is the purpose of the witch hunt? I've heard from the stories that it has not been done in about a hundred years. I've lived in Aiteria for almost a year, so I feel like I

understand the situation fairly well, but I don't understand the religion's influence at all.'

She thought it was like the religion she had learnt from history classes, but it seemed to be quite different when she asked about it.

"Where's gramps Edwin at a time like this?"

Nikolaus, who was drinking hot sake and eating gyusuji doteyaki, looked at a seat in the corner of the counter, which was reserved for the deacon, while grumbling reproachfully.

After the Archbishop came, Edwin had suddenly disappeared. If that easygoing deacon was around, Nikolaus had a feeling that he certainly would have taken some precautions.

"This witch hunt sounds dangerous somehow."

"Everyone is afraid they will be next. Also, I want another plate of Napolitan."

It seemed like Gernot's tone was the same as always, but he was angry that the City Council's complaint to the Archbishop was not going well. It was like throwing salt into the sea, a waste of effort.

It was impossible to confute with the opponent if the other party did not come to the negotiation table.

He was probably also slightly irritated that he had added more tabasco than usual into his Napolitan, which he revered for its harmony above anything else.

"Can't you stop it somehow, Gernot-san?"

"We're protesting, but the Archbishop's side is feigning ignorance. Normally, since Aiteria is a territory under the direct control of the Empire, the Archbishop can't interfere at a moment's notice. If the discussions get bigger, it will become a political matter between the Empire and the Holy Kingdom (Rupsia). Perhaps he is playing his game of witch hunt outside the castle walls, where the ruling power of the city council is in the grey area, because he knows this."

During Bachschouf's era, when he was the president of the City Council, there had been a motion for the Archbishop to serve as the head of the church in Aiteria. That way, the Archbishop, who had no jurisdiction in Aiteria, would be able to exert his influence and gain huge influential power in Aiteria.

It seemed that there had been strong appeals from the Archbishop, but it was the usual example of a case where the verdict was suspended.

Looking back on it now, suspension was probably the right answer. If that motion had been approved, the witch hunt might have happened earlier.

“How about requesting help from the lords ruling outside the city wall?”

“The great Lord of Sachnussenburg has a lot of influence on the Magisterium. If the rumors are true, then you can be assured that it would be about time for him to put things in order, but... there were rumours that he’s bedridden with sickness.”

“Things won’t run smoothly in any way, huh.”

Nobuyuki leaked a sigh lightly.

When the commencement of the witch hunt had been at the rumour phase, Nobuyuki had sent Helmina and Eva home. He judged that it was better for the two of them to stay in their houses until the situation settled. During these dangerous times, one shouldn’t go out too much.

Besides, there was no need to worry about the shortage of hands.

It would normally not be surprising if the shop was full at this time, but there were only three regulars here today.

As expected, the people of Aiteria did not feel like drinking carefreely in this kind of atmosphere.

“Speaking of witches, there are no mushrooms among the tempura, huh?”

“We can’t be careless.”

Shinobu responded to Lorentz, who muttered as he separated the shrimp kakiage into halves.

The other day, they had heard about the custom of abstaining from mushrooms because of the witch hunt in Aiteria long ago.

Autumn was when mushrooms were delicious, but it was better not to serve it in this situation.

Everyone felt uncomfortable for no particular reason.

Shinobu was no exception. She did not understand the criteria for the people who were being arrested as witches, nor the witch hunt itself.

If there was any consolation, the residents of Alteria were also uncomfortable about the witch hunt.

No one had approved of the witch hunt, including the regulars. It was old-fashioned, and they thought of it as a shameful past.

“Shinobu-chan, are you all not going back to your hometown?”

Nikolaus asked as he pecked at the doteyaki.

After hearing it for the first time, Shinobu herself was surprised, as she hadn’t had plans to withdraw to Japan. Even though she had thought about it during the ‘Toriaezu Nama’ uproar, it seemed she had come to like Aiteria a lot. She had never thought about it as an issue of another world.

Furthermore, even if she returned to Japan, it wasn’t returning home in the truest sense anymore.

“My hometown is far away. Extremely far.”

Shinobu vaguely smiled without emotion.

It seemed Nobuyuki had shrugged his shoulders, but it might just be her imagination.

“I’ll be here to continue running the store. Perhaps the uproar about witches will suddenly stop.”

“There’s that, too. I’m worried about those who are caught, but it will be over soon.”

Lorentz, whose eighth cup was poured by Nobuyuki, laughed heartily.

When Shinobu was tempted to laugh along, the plate she had been wiping made a loud noise on the floor. The plate had broken. It had been a cheap plate, but she had really liked it.

“Are you okay?”

Shinobu crouched down to pick up the fragments and nodded lightly to Nobuyuki, who peered in.

When she looked at her finger, which stung in pain from a prick, she saw blood seeping out. This was unusual.

With her index finger in her mouth, Shinobu felt a strange welling up of anxiety that weighed down on her.

The night in Aiteria quietly went on. Dawn was still some time away.



The rain that had begun to fall since dawn had turned into wet snow before anyone noticed.

Somewhere in the snow, a raven cawed.

The wheat seeds sowed during autumn laid sleeping in the ground, covered by a layer of white from the snow that fluttered down.

Even the black soil field, which extended as far as the eye could see, was still not enough to feed the stomachs of the people in Aiteria. In order to sustain such voracious appetites, Aiteria purchased various goods from the outskirts.

For that purpose, the highway was well maintained, and a horse-drawn carriage painted black travelled calmly on it.

The crest on it indicated its owner, the District Archbishop. When a crossing farmer saw it, he would bow down respectfully.

However, the Archbishop who would normally receive the homage was not in this carriage.

Presently, it was a small man called Damien who was driving the carriage.

Everything was going well.

Some might say it was going too well. By using the Archbishop, the witch hunt had been revived in Aiteria.

His only aim was the annoying Izakaya Nobu.

Baron Branton and the Bachshouf Firm. He had lost two jobs, all because of that pub. A half-hearted revenge was not enough.

The horse-drawn carriage passed smoothly under the main gates and pulled into the main streets of Aiteria.

With the District Archbishop's crest, there wasn't any unnecessary people asking for identity.

The horse-drawn carriage drove along the stone pavement road.

At the heart of Aiteria, near the sandbanks, the horse-drawn carriage stopped in front of the most prestigious inn in Alteria, the "Four-Winged Eagle." If he had been with Bachschouf, who was implicated of a crime and a wanted man, he would have been turned away by the inn, but naturally, when they saw Damien's face, they welcomed him.

"What's going on, Damien? What's going on?"

As soon as he entered the room, Enrico flared up.

His head was pretty good, but he was devoted to his strange divination. That was why the Archbishop had picked him for this unimportant job of arranging the gathered information.

“What’s the matter, Enrico-dono? You are in the presence of His Holiness, the Archbishop. Calm down.”

“How could you calm down in this situation? There are rumours on the streets that the witch hunt has begun, Damien. There is also the protest by the City Council of Aiteria.”

“Rumours are merely rumours. It has not actually begun.”

It was true that people had been gathered in an old residence in the outskirts.

It was true that it was made to look like a witch hunt. By fueling the anxiety, the eyes of suspicion would be turned towards Izakaya Nobu. Although the aim was to cause damage to its reputation through rumours, it seemed that it was not going too well. It was difficult to deal with a restaurant that had many regulars.

However, Damien was not so foolish as to start a witch hunt on his own, without support.

The witch hunt was being carried out under the Archbishop’s authority. It couldn’t run without his approval.

“Then, where’s His Holiness?”

“It’s time for worship. He should be before the Goddess statue. But, he should be done soon.”

Damien lightly shrugged his neck, brushed off the snow on his shoulder, and sat down on the couch.

The firewood popped.

The fire in the golden fireplace burned with a dazzling flame.

Even though the buildings around here were built for harsh winters, it seemed that it was still very cold for Enrico, who had been born in the Holy Kingdom. He wore thick clothes that were unbecoming for his skinny body. It was only autumn now. What would he do when winter came?

It was also true of the Archbishop.

He had been born and raised in the Holy Kingdom. The Archbishop, who had grown up in the warmer lands in the south, would surely be affected by the cold. The Archbishop's desire to leave this place as soon as possible had become a source of power for Damien.

After the lager smuggling incident, Damien, who had lost his patron, became dependent on the former Archbishop.

He tried to blackmail one of the Archbishop's subordinates who had defaulted on his debt from the Bachschouf Firm, but surprisingly, he was employed without trouble.

A starving dragon would even eat a cornered bird. *(TL note: This probably means along the lines of "a drowning man will clutch at a straw.")*

He reckoned that he could escape the government officials if he left Aiteria, and escape the pursuit by seeking refuge under the Magisterium.

He had immediately realised that the clergy, who was born in the Holy Kingdom, wanted to return home.

Rather than it being because the place lacked glamour, the reason was because of the cold temperature and the food.

For the Archbishop, who was used to luxury, it seemed living on potatoes in the northern part of the Empire was like living in hell on this world.

"Oh, Damien. You've come?"

"It is my pleasure to receive your countenance."

Archbishop Rodrigo, who came out from the specially arranged worship, was huge. To Damien, who was not very tall, he looked like a giant. Even though he had a considerable width, he had height as well. It had probably been torturing indeed to only eat potatoes with that kind of body.

"I believe I heard from Enrico that there is a search for a witch. "

"Yes, it is a worry even though it's a groundless rumour, Your Holiness. I've also explained to Enrico that it is just a rumour. It probably looked that way to the populace when people were gathered in a residence in the outskirts."

"Is that so?"

The Archbishop nodded as he immediately helped himself to some mulled wine. Rather than wanting to get drunk, he probably wanted to feel the heat. The cup, which had lead coating the inside, was a gift from Damien. It seemed that the Archbishop liked the sweet and mellow taste of the wine in the Empire, even though it was poorer in quality when compared to the ones in the Holy Kingdom and the Eastern Kingdom (Oiria).

Damien mentally sneered at this easygoing attitude. This Archbishop might be an excellent scholar, but he was not good at being a plotter. When Damien wanted to search for witches on behalf of the busy Archbishop, the Archbishop had gotten on board willingly.

It might be a miscalculation to report that there might be a witch in Aiteria, but it was a surprise. The present purpose of the Archbishop was to find a witch. Although he had not heard about the details, it was probably going to be about witches occurring again due to the corruption of the Magisterium. If Damien was in the Archbishop's position, he would certainly do that.

Find a witch and return to the Holy Kingdom. Damien didn't know whether could accomplish such a thing, but the Archbishop's enthusiasm in his search for a witch was real. The amount of money spent in this investigation was not low either. Of course, Damien was getting plenty of sweet juices from there. *(TL: embezzling money)*

Presently, the one holding the most power in the Holy kingdom was Hürghigegot, a considerably sharp and able man with reputation. It did not seem possible for Rodrigo to fight him just by finding the witch alone. It might even be difficult to ascend to Cardinal, even if there was an empty seat.

"So, Damien. I understand that the witch hunt is an unfounded rumour from the sparrows tweeting on the streets. So from this point onwards, how will the witch search work?"

"There is a store suspected of being a witch's lair. We will strike there."

"I see, a witch's lair, huh. Will the witch be there?"

The Archbishop stroked his chin while Enrico cut off his words.

Enrico was not too eager about the witch hunt itself, so he seemed to be trying to object to it.

“Do not worry. It is a shop with a lot of suspicious rumours. There will be a witch.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Damien. As a priest, I pray there is no witch. If the shop isn’t a witch’s lair, it is a good thing.”

“I agree wholeheartedly.”

While responding, Damien mentally cursed the Archbishop as a half-witted giant. There was no meaning in keeping up appearances at a place like this. It had been an open secret for many years that the Archbishop was looking for a witch. Did his blood have trouble reaching his brain in that body? *(TL: basically saying, his big body made him stupid)* It would be easier for someone to carry the head of a palanquin, which was lighter, but he was troubled about how to he should handle this fool. He didn’t mind the fact that the Archbishop was a fool, but he might suffer disadvantages if he got involved with this fool further.

However, he had not forgotten to prepare for that.

The people gathered in the outskirts were prepared to escape if something came up. He had already had secret talks with the Princess of the Eastern Kingdom in the Regent Palace. As long as he crossed the border, everything would become history.

Of course, it would be good if nothing went wrong.

It would be amusing to get revenge on Izakaya Nobu and stay in Aiteria with the Archbishop as well.

Even though the unity of the City Council was strangely strong, it could always be broken from the inside.

His sweet delusions were broken by unexpected words from the Archbishop.

“Now then, Damien, why don’t we go to the shop called Izakaya Nobu now?”

“Now, you say?”

Damien felt faint at Rodrigo’s carefreeness. The man looked like he was about to hum a tune.

He had arranged to lay out traps in sequence from here onwards for Nobu, so that they could not talk their way out.

Making use of thugs, faking a food poisoning case... he would keep piling up evidence that could not be explained away, such as mushroom dishes being served in Nobu and fraudulent seditious documents concerning witches appearing. Causing unrest in the city by spreading rumours about the witch was the first step. This was only the preparation phase.

“But Your Holiness, isn’t it a little too early?”

The Archbishop frowned at Damien, who strained his voice to speak.

“Isn’t it better to ascertain whether there is a witch or not as soon as possible?”

“Ah, yes, but...”

“It seems you’re busy with something. If you shut yourself up in the mansion in the outskirts, you might end up only eating potatoes? It’s better to finish up difficult jobs as soon as possible. So, let us go now. We have a carriage too.”

In his position, Damien could not move when the Archbishop was personally leading the way.

He involuntarily ground his teeth as he stood up.

It would be alright. He was on the offensive. Izakaya Nobu was the witch’s store. Damien told himself this as he boarded the carriage.

When he boarded alongside the large Archbishop, the scenery looked quite different, although it was still the same carriage as before.

With impatience and vexation onboard, the black-coated carriage smoothly began to move.

Chapter 63

The Witch and the Archbishop (Part 2)

It had been raining intermittently for the whole morning.

Sleet fell from the low hanging clouds, which made Inns & Stables Street muddy, even though it was afternoon. There were only a few people walking down the road, all at a quick pace.

Even on a day like this, Izakaya Nobu was busy preparing to open the store.

Shinobu and Nobuyuki were the only ones working in the shop, as they had made Eva and Helmina take the day off.

With just the two of them, it seemed like they had returned to when they started a year ago, when they had just opened, but Ingrid was there too.

She seemed to have been drinking last night, and was now taking a break by passing out here. Ingrid was suffering from a terrible hangover and was laying down on a table in the back. When they tried taking away her small plate of pudding to see if she was alive or not, only her mouth moved. It seemed that she was not dead after all.

When Camilla came to check up on her, she said it was because Ingrid had been considerably affected by the witch uproar.

Even though Ingrid probably wasn't the cause of this incident, she had even considered moving away temporarily.

While Shinobu peeled the boiled daikon, which was going to be served by Nobuyuki tomorrow, they heard a commotion outside of the shop. They could hear the sound of a horse carriage and a horse's neighs.

They heard the carriage slowly approach, then come to a stop right in front of the shop. A cold sweat ran down Shinobu's back.

None of the regulars came to the shop by carriage. She had a bad feeling about this.

Ingrid, who noticed the sounds of the carriage, began to stretch. She was wearing a black robe again today.

The witch who existed in the legends of Aitheria was said to wear black clothes as well. If this carriage belonged to the witch hunt, this could end badly.

As Shinobu thought, 'She won't be able to escape through the back door either',

somebody roughly rapped on the glass door.

“We-welcome!”

“...elcome.”

Unlike Shinobu, whose voice was higher than usual, Nobuyuki remained calm. However, she was thankful that he was prepared to move from the counter immediately if something happened.

When the door was pulled open a little, a customer forced his way in.

No, it wasn't exactly a customer. It was a face that Shinobu did not want to see.

“Hey, the dignitaries of Izakaya Nobu. Thanks for that time.”

It was Damien.

It was the little scoundrel who had been sneaking around with Bachschouf when the beer at Izakaya Nobu was suspected of being lager, a prohibited good.

She didn't think that she would meet him again, especially so soon, as he was supposedly a wanted person.

“How may I help you?”

“I'd like to say that I came to a pub to drink alcohol and eat delicious food, but I can't say that. I am not alone today. His Holiness the Archbishop is also here.”

He theatrically opened the door further.

A giant wrapped in priest garb entered, ducking through the doorway.

Although he was probably past his fifties, his plump skin still had some turgor to it, so he looked younger than he actually was.

Although called a priest's garb, the man's clothes were made of pure white silk and embroidered with silver thread. It looked to be of higher quality than the ones Edwin wore. It was an outfit worthy of a high-ranking priest.

“I see. This shop is overflowing with exoticness.”

The Archbishop took a seat at the front table with a peculiar composure, as if he was an acquaintance who had been invited to eat together. He rubbed his palms together, which were chubby, like a baby's. When he saw Ingrid at the back, he smiled and

bowed slightly. It was like he was just a civil customer. However, this could also be an act.

Shinobu gently placed a hot towel at the table, a movement honed by years of practice. The Archbishop, who received it, seemed momentarily surprised by its warmth, but he smiled happily and juggled it between his hands to wipe away the slight chill. Damien, who was looking at the situation bitterly, cleared his throat loudly.

“What I want to say is, I have brought His Holiness the Archbishop over as company today. There are suspicions that Izakaya Nobu is a witch’s lair. He is here to preside over the trial.”

It was about the witch hunt after all.

Initially, it was a bit surprising that Damien was behind this incident, but it was not quite as surprising upon second thought.

He probably wanted revenge against Izakaya Nobu. He was the type of man who would do such things without batting an eyelid.

Shinobu’s face turned grim without her realizing it.

In such cases, it was better for Shinobu to face them before Nobuyuki did. This was because Nobuyuki, who was not good at talking, might fall for a trap.

“This is just a pub. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Of course, I would like to think so too, for the sake of Aitheria.”

Damien continued, with a sarcastic smile plastered on his face.

“However, I’m not convinced. I wonder if this shop has another side to it?”

“There’s none. We are just a pub conducting honest business.”

“Oh, honest, huh. I see.”

The Archbishop had nothing to say. He was just watching how things were turning out with great interest.

It was probably Damien who had actively pushed for the witch hunt.

“It is said that witches are familiar with the ancient spirit elves (alf) and that they are

friends with the white snow fox. There was a witness saying that they saw a fox entering and leaving the shop. Do you know anything about it?"

"A fox... you say?"

She glanced at the household Shinto altar. The God of Harvest, Inari, was enshrined here, but they did not really own a fox. One couldn't possibly have slipped out to cause mischief, right?

Sometimes, things like fried tofu and inari sushi went missing, but Shinobu had assumed that Nobuyuki had cleaned them up.

(TL note: Inari is the god of foxes, fertility and harvest)

"It's no use playing dumb, you know? You better speak honestly."

"No, I really don't know... anything."

Damien lowered his small head. He thought, 'This stubborn fellow really looks clueless.'

It seemed the interrogation would continue. Damien took out a piece of folded parchment and licked his fingers before opening it.

An oppressive questioning was not a pleasant thing to go through. Moreover, the interrogator was Damien.

She wanted it to end early, but the other party was having none of it. She could not lose focus.

"Then, how about the mushrooms? Mushrooms are a symbol of witches. Because of the memories of the previous witch hunt, it's also a food that wasn't eaten much in Aitheria. I heard that Izakaya Nobu is using plenty of it."

"I've heard the younger generations are not too bothered by it."

"There is a big difference from being not bothered and having no manners. There are some older people who are still living without eating mushrooms, even now."

"That's because... we moved here from somewhere else."

Damien's eyes flashed suspiciously. It made Shinobu feel sticky and disgusted when she saw him smirk.

“Somewhere else, huh. Right, Izakaya Nobu came from somewhere else, with unfamiliar dishes and unheard of store decorations. It’s cool during summer, and for some reason, warm during winter. It’s truly wonderful. Of course everyone will like this place.”

He looked like a clown, or something like that with all of the gestures he was making as he spoke.

“So, from where?”

Shinobu was at a loss at that piercing question.

She could not answer. It was impossible to answer. There was no way he would believe it if she said that they came from a different world.

If she couldn’t explain where they came from, would she be treated as a witch?

She didn’t know for sure, but the opponent was Damien. Her hesitation presented him with an opening.

“No answer? You don’t need to answer that. The very existence of this shop is a witch’s work, isn’t it?”

A laugh from the table in the back of the room interrupted Damien.

It was Ingrid.

The laughter gradually grew louder, overpowering even Damien.

“There was a rather interesting story, but it’s very absurd, don’t you think so?”

“Who... are you?”

“I’m Ingrid, a regular of this shop.”



As she stepped forward before the puzzled Damien, Ingrid wore her usual, easygoing smile.

However, the somewhat lonely look in her eyes revealed her resignation. The amulet that hung on her neck still shone with a clear blue sparkle.

“When you say you don’t know where they came from, aren’t most people like that?”

“I did not come here to have a philosophical or theological debate!”

“Oh, my. Theology is the only thing to debate during a witch’s trial...”

Ingrid chuckled and continued.

“For example, Marquis Sachnussenburg is of a very old House, but they still obey the Emperor, even though his roots are unknown. There are even stories that he was an adventurer, a wanderer, a bandit, or a pirate. All we know is that he is from the North. Everyone’s a stranger at first.”

“So, what about it?”

“In Aitheria, there are a lot of people with unknown origins. Even if you don’t know where they came from, they have been here in Aitheria for one year now. If Izakaya Nobu is a witch’s lair, then half of the population in Aitheria must be witches too.”

“I shall not listen to this kind of ridiculous story!”

“No, it’s not a ridiculous story.”

Damien’s nose flared up when Ingrid dodged the question.

The flow of the talk began to move away from Nobu and towards an unrelated topic before anyone realized.

“No, we are talking about witches. Izakaya Nobu is the witch’s lair.”

“Do you have enough evidence for you to argue so vehemently?”

“Who do you think you are! If you’re going to defend Izakaya Nobu this much, depending on the outcome, you will...”

Ingrid smiled sweetly at Damien who was rattling and spraying spit everywhere.

“Me? I’m a witch, you know. A genuine one.”

“A genuine... witch?”

The dumbfounded Damien’s face changed from an angry red to fearful white.

He had not expected a witch to really come out. If you poked the bushes, a snake could appear. Although Damien turned around to ask for help, the Archbishop remained silent.

“Yes, I’m a witch. I’m the witch who lives deep in the forest, just as you said, where I make medicines and protective charms to cure illnesses and treat injuries. I’ve yet to meet with the elves (alf), though.”

“Y-yo-you, do you understand what you’re saying?”

“I know. However, I’m still a devout believer of the Holy Order. I have not missed a single worship, and have memorised the holy scriptures. Being a witch is just my way of life.”

Ingrid’s clear statement resounded like she was a member of the clergy, rather than a witch.

However, her words that were filled with conviction seemed to further encourage Damien’s efforts to put her down.

“What a ridiculous story! I have never heard of a witch who isn’t an enemy of the faith.”

“Only a person ignorant of the world, who ignores his own lack of study, can say such things. There is no reason why witches can’t have faith in Gods and Goddesses. On the other hand, there is no reason that priests can’t be witches.”

“But you’re a witch!”

Damien roared. He probably couldn’t stand being called a person that was ignorant of the world. His pale face was already red again.

“I’m a witch, and also a former clergy member. So how will you judge me? Tell me your reasons.”

"I will judge by the power of the Archbishop-sama. You cannot escape when you have declared yourself a witch. I'll walk you off to the residence in the outskirts immediately, and burn you to death..."

"That's enough."

The Archbishop, who was watching the development of events quietly until now, interrupted.

"That's enough, Damien. Your witch hunt ends with this."

"Your Holiness, you say this is enough?"

"I mean what I said. I have found the witch I was looking for."

After sparing only a backward glance at the stunned Damien, the Archbishop walked towards Ingrid.

His expression was not one of a clergyman who was hunting down a witch. Rather, it was one full of joy.

"It has been a long time, Ingrid-senpai. I'm glad that you are doing well."

"I do not know an Archbishop who would greet me with 'it's been a long time' though," said Ingrid puzzledly.

"Have you forgotten? It's Rodrigo. We were together at the Magisterium, the "Shorty" Rodrigo."

The wrinkles on Ingrid's forehead immediately disappeared and her eyes opened wide in surprise when the name "Shorty Rodrigo" rolled off the tip of his tongue.

"Eh... that Rodrigo? But... you're so tall."

The Archbishop smiled as he stretched his back. At first, he hadn't been entirely sure if she was really his senior, Ingrid.

He only nodded with a grunt at Ingrid's words. The colour of surprise and joy filled her eyes.

A light cracking sound could be heard, and the amulet broke.

The blue gem fitted into the wood split into two, as if it had finished its duties, and fell down to the floor effortlessly.

“I was looking for you the whole time, ever since you left the Magisterium and became a witch.”

Ingrid looked embarrassed. She looked like she had been found after playfully hiding.

“I did not leave behind any clues...”

“I have been sending people to places famous for its alcohol and sweets. Of course, even to places with rumours of witches.”

Rodrigo's witch search seemed like a funny story, but it had been a series of unbelievable hardships.

“When I heard that there was a witch who loves pumpkin pie in the Brochelian forest, I dispatched someone there, and when I heard that there was a witch who loves to drink and had come to bathe in the hot spring districts of Argonia, someone headed to the north...”

Since it was not considered official work, he could not use his regular subordinates. He remembered that he could use money to hire some dubious people, and it had coincidentally been Damien this time.

“Even in the past, when you set your sights on something, you wouldn't look at anything else, but that's bad behaviour, you know.”

“I had high expectations this time. I heard that the former Emperor, His Majesty, also had a favourite pub in the city, you see.”

“I didn't think I would be found in this way... how many years did you take, I wonder.”

“Yeah, it did take quite a while.”

The passage of time flowed differently for those two. Shinobu and Nobuyuki couldn't follow the turn of events.

The Archbishop's purpose was not a witch hunt, but a witch search instead? In addition, the one person he had been looking for was Ingrid.

It was Damien who broke the peaceful atmosphere.

“So what! That person called herself a witch! She even said it in front of His Holiness the Archbishop. The shop where the witch comes and goes is also equally guilty!”

Damien kicked a chair as he caused a commotion.

Rather, he ended up striking it with his shin instead and had to hold his foot in pain. The Archbishop’s eyes were filled with pity as he looked at Damien.

“It’s a witch. You, and you, and everyone else are witches! Izakaya Nobu is a witch’s shop! You can’t stay in Aitheria anymore. Even if you aren’t judged, you will shoulder the brand of a witch for the rest of your life!”

“You should stop now, Damien.”

“Your Holiness, please do not stop me. These guys will be branded as witches...”

“I can’t do that, and I won’t do it. The times are different from a hundred years ago.”

“But then, why did you agree to the witch hunt?!”

The Archbishop shook his head while making a complicated expression.

“I was just searching for a witch. It was you who mistook it for a witch hunt, Damien.”

Damien, who was trembling and shivering with fear, immediately scampered off like a rabbit.

Nobuyuki tried to stop him when he tried to escape through the entrance. After seeing that he couldn’t escape through Nobuyuki, who was holding a rolling pin, he gave up and instantly switched directions, running towards the back door.

“That side is...!”

Shinobu cried out and unsuccessfully tried to catch Damien’s hand. When Damien ran out the back door, she saw an unfamiliar mountain path instead of the familiar back streets of the shopping street in Japan, before the door creaked to a close.



This wasn't the back alleys of Aitheria that he knew.

Damien was walking on a stone pathway in the middle of a thick and dense forest. If it was just a mountain path, it wouldn't have been too scary. At best, bandits and highwaymen would appear, but he was used to dealing with those sort of people.

The problem was, this mountain didn't seem to be an ordinary mountain.

Damien gently stroked some tree bark, which was painted vermillion. It was called a torii, but he didn't know that.

This vermillion structure, which dominated this mountain path, appeared to be a gate protecting a pagan shrine.

The place is most probably Fushimi Inari temple, as you would've guessed, a temple that worships the God of Harvest (Inari)

There were one or two thousand of them extending to the front and the back. Damien couldn't possibly get lost.

After walking for a long time, he finally reached a fork, both of which weren't covered by the torii.

"Where... exactly am I?"

Damien had just mustered his voice to mutter when he heard a fox's howl.

'Was I put under the witch's spell?' While wiping off the sweat on his forehead, he glared at the direction of the voice. However, there was nobody in sight.

He didn't have the energy to move his legs and was stuck in place.

The fox howled again.



A few days later, Damien was found completely exhausted and unable to move in the back alleys of Aitheria.

Chapter 64

Steamed Clams with Sake

Before anyone had noticed, the sleet had come to a stop.

The setting sun began to faintly shine through the thick clouds. The gentle, late autumn light illuminated the interior of the store through the glass door.

Rodrigo slowly sat down beside Ingrid. Although they were sitting by Izakaya Nobu's tidy counter, he seemed to be reminiscing about a chaotic bar in the Holy Kingdom they had been to decades ago.

"In those days, you had no money and were always drinking watered down alcohol in a cheap bar."

"But Rodrigo just drank milk all the time."

Ingrid also seemed to recall those times.

"It worked, you know. I've grown taller."

The distilled liquor extracted from the lees that were leftover after making wine was a poor apprentice priest's friend. Since the original liquor was quite strong, you could still get drunk after it was watered down. As it was not a liquor that was regularly circulated, it also had the advantage letting talking your way out of being accused of drinking. Those had been good times.

Rodrigo and Ingrid had been slightly more well known among the poor apprentice priests.

"After you left, Edwin-san paid off your tab at that bar."

"Heeh, that Edwin-san, huh. I only remembered him as the senior with hair as long as his sermons, but he has some good points too, doesn't he?"

"That's because he was a serious person. I wonder how is he doing now?"

“I saw someone who looked similar in Aitheria before. He couldn’t possibly be only a deacon, so I probably mistook that person for him.”

“He couldn’t possibly be a deacon. He’s the right hand man of Cardinal Hürghigegot.”

“That’s right. At any rate, he must be a good guy, since he treats people so selflessly.”

“As compensation for that incident, he also helped me a lot with my studies.”

After he said that, he covered his mouth. As the district Archbishop, Rodrigo, who was called His Eminence, wasn’t supposed to use the word ‘I’.

However, Ingrid was not one to mind appearances. He noticed that she had opened her mouth, but it wasn’t to make fun of him.

The two people were basking in the nostalgic atmosphere that filled Izakaya Nobu. In this moment, Rodrigo and Ingrid were not a Cardinal and a Witch, they were just “Rodrigo and Ingrid.”

He took a deep breath and felt refreshed from the fleeting feelings from those days. He didn’t deserve what he had now.

The mugs emptied before anyone had noticed, and they both got a second glass.

(TL note: Rodrigo used “boku” which is an informal way of saying “I”)

The more Rodrigo enjoyed the gentle atmosphere and nostalgic silence, the more guilty he felt.

‘I must apologise to Ingrid.’

Not only as an Archbishop, but as Rodrigo too. For this time, and that time as well.

It was Rodrigo’s mistake to have used a small fry like Damien to look for a witch. He couldn’t use his usual subordinates to search for witches, since it wasn’t official business. Other than that, he had also gotten very impatient because he was about to make a debut at the Cardinal election.

“Ingrid...”

Rodrigo made up his mind, but Ingrid turned him down with a smile.

“Rodrigo, let’s talk more about bad booze.”

Ingrid’s smile as she gulped down the lager was the same as in those days. Rather than growing old, it was more like she had grown more beautiful over the years. Rodrigo

was moved by how time had treated her.

“What is it, senpai? Shall we change locations?”

“Switching places?”

“Yeah, the dining hall at the inn I’m staying at is a pretty good place for Aitheria. It has an Eastern Kingdom (Oiria) style menu. The fish is... well, it’s inland so... but the meat is delicious, you know.”

“Oh?”

In those days, they used to argue about which good shops had better food. After Ingrid left the Holy Kingdom (Rupsia), he had studied diligently and gotten into a proper position. His stipend was large enough to make people envious. However, he had not been satisfied, since he had been eating alone the whole time. He had a feeling that his hunger would finally be satisfied for the first time by eating together with Ingrid.

“But this place is fine, Rodrigo.”

“What do you mean, senpai?”

“The atmosphere here is similar to those days, isn’t it? And, this shop has delicious dishes.”

Rodrigo unintentionally recoiled at Ingrid’s unexpected words.

Was there such a thing? This shop was on Inns and Stables street, which was an extension of Aitheria. Normally, it was not a place where you would expect to find good food.

He thought Ingrid might be kidding, but it didn’t seem like it. She was just sipping the delicious lager.

“Shinobu-chan, please give us something delicious.”

“Yes, I understand!”

The waitress called Shinobu responded energetically to Ingrid’s order. There was no helping it, since she had already ordered. The food might not suit

Rodrigo's tongue, which was used to gourmet food, but it was Ingrid's recommendation. It would be amusing to return to those poor apprentice days by trying to pretend to enjoy eating cheap food.

Besides, he was confident that he would feel that it was delicious, no matter what he ate.

He had been able to meet the person he had been looking for all this time. There was nothing to be sad about.

It was the mushroom incident.

There had been no clue to be found, except for the fact that Ingrid had left the Holy Kingdom in order to cover up Rodrigo's big mess and became a witch somewhere. At first, he thought she would be easy to find, but it took quite a long time. Still, he was glad that things had not changed.

It was a good sign.

Even though he had lost Bachschouf, his financial support, his spirit to fight to the bitter end in the Cardinal election began to rise.

His luck must have been changing, since he was able to reunite with Ingrid after searching for so many years. This was probably an advance notice of God's arrangements of his fate.

This chance encounter was a signal for Rodrigo, who had spent his time in the shadows until now, to counterattack.

He would take the Cardinal's seat and return to the Holy Kingdom. After that, he would settle the dispute between his fundamentalists faction and Hürghigegot's reformist faction.

"Thank you for waiting!"

The dish that Shinobu carried was something he was familiar with.

"Vongole, huh?"

(TL note: vongole is Italian for clams)

He felt nostalgic saying its name. Clams were a staple food for poor apprentice priests. In the Holy Kingdom, which had numerous coastlines, clams could be harvested bountifully. If you dredged the sandy beaches with a rake during gathering season, it wouldn't take long to fill up a bucket.

Apprentice priests would go to the beach on the pretense of meditating, collect lots of clams in a bucket, and then take them to the bar and sell it at dirt cheap prices. They

were paid in drinks, not gold. Turning a bucket of clams into several drinks became fuel for the apprentice priests to make great progress in their meditations and discussions. Their snacks were, of course, lots of clams as well.

It was nostalgic.

He had grown so tired of eating them that he hadn't even wanted to look at them anymore back then, but now he felt a sense of nostalgia.

Unlike Ingrid, who was born in the Empire, Rodrigo came from the seaside, where the Emperor was from.

He had only eaten inland dishes when he was assigned to this place as an Archbishop, so his nostalgia awakened just from seeing the clams.

That being said, clams were not that delicious.

It was a conclusion that Rodrigo had arrived at after eating various kinds of clam dishes.

If it was fresh, there might be ways to eat it deliciously, but there was little hope of that in the inland Aitheria.

He could enjoy it if it was changed to pasta before his eyes, but he didn't expect a bar in the northernmost part of the Empire to have the Holy Kingdom's specialty, pasta, in reserve.

"This looks delicious. Can I get hot sake (atsukan), too?"

"Right, one hot sake coming right up."

"Can I have two sake cups please?"

Was the atsukan Ingrid ordered a brand of liquor? Since it was a shellfish dish, it could be white wine.

It was said that the Empire had more wineries than the Holy Kingdom (Rupsia) or Eastern Kingdom (Oiria), so it was possible that Ingrid knew of some good, cheap stocks.

It was nice to enjoy such drinks once in a while.

Rodrigo, who was tired of gourmet dishes, felt even more refreshed.

He wanted to eat cheap shellfish dishes seasoned with nostalgia and get severely drunk a large amount of cheap wine.

It was an unbecoming behaviour for a member of the clergy, but conversely, this could be the last time that he would be able to enjoy something like this.

Once he became the Cardinal of the Holy Kingdom, he would not be able to enjoy himself like a fool anymore.

“Well then, shall we toast again?”

However, what Ingrid held out was obviously not white wine.

The sake that had been poured into the small, bisque cup was colourless and transparent, and there was a scent of alcohol wafting from it.

When the fragrance tickled Rodrigo’s nose, something came to his mind. The clams. He had thought the smell somehow seemed familiar, but it seemed that it was because of the sake in the clams.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

He drank the cup in one go and reflexively froze up. He could taste this sake through his nose and throat. He understood exactly why it was served in a small cup.

Although this was the first time he had drunk this, its fragrance and taste were good. If someone were deceived by its mellowness and went too far, he would get drunk immediately. This was the kind of drink that was best enjoyed through sipping.

He unconsciously smiled, since he himself had reached a point where he could talk about sake before he had realized it. When he had been sitting next to Ingrid in the past, he had only drunk milk.

While thinking that, he started on the clams that had been steamed in sake.

He did not care about his manners. Right now, he was not the Archbishop, but Rodrigo. He picked up the shell of a rather large clam and brought it to his mouth while enjoying the aroma from the steam.

It was hot, but it was also delicious.

The taste had been preserved because it was steamed, but he couldn’t smell the normal odor of the clam.

Before he could savour the taste, his hands were already reaching for the next clam of their own volition.

Slurp.

Slurp.

He somehow snapped the stubborn adductor muscle with his teeth and threw the clams into his mouth, one after another.



This atsukan was good too.

It might have been delicious to eat this with white wine, but there was atsukan for this occasion now.

Beside him, Ingrid was also piling up shells, one after another, on an empty plate. As he continued eating, he could feel heat rising up from the bottom of his stomach, thanks to the sake.

It was an experience he had never felt from his lifeless gourmet food. He was grateful to Ingrid for recommending this.

After Rodrigo ate the last clam, he felt as if he was ten or twenty years younger. It was unusual for Rodrigo, who strongly believed that leaving leftovers was a sign of wealth, to clean his plate.

“How is it? The clams are pretty good, aren’t they?”

“I didn’t think I could eat such delicious clams in Aitheria.”

As Rodrigo wiped off his gushing sweat, he grinned broadly. Izakaya Nobu. It really was a good store. Thanks to this shop, he was able to meet with Ingrid again.

He had suffered from abdominal pain and anemia for a while, but now, he felt as if all that had disappeared, including his depression.

He took his usual cup out of his pocket from habit, but was stopped by Ingrid when he tried to order mulled wine.

“This cup... looks a little unusual, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, you know it too, senpai? This is a cup given to me by that man, Damien. The antique style decoration fits my taste, and when I drink cheap wines with this, they become sweeter.”

“I see.”

He handed the cup over to Ingrid for her to take a good look, but she sighed and handed it over to Shinobu to be thrown away.

“Shinobu, please throw this cup away, and make sure nobody picks it up.”

“Ingrid-senpai?”

“And you, Rodrigo, you’re not fit for politics. Don’t think about it too much, you should step out while you still can.”

Rodrigo was stunned by all this when Shinobu, who was looking at the cup, raised her voice.

“There’s... lead spread on the inside. It definitely shouldn’t be used.”

“What do you mean?”

Ingrid answered instead.

“If you continue to drink wine with this... the lead in the cup will dissolve and react with the wine. The more you drink, the faster your body gets ruined.”

Now that she mentioned it, he realized that ever since he started drinking wine from this cup, there had been a sudden increase in his abdominal pains and anemia. In fact, he felt like his depression had also come around the same time.

“Worst case scenario, you might even die.”

Assassination.

The word ran through his mind.

Was it Damien, who had presented the gift, or was there someone pulling the strings from the shadows? Either way, if he had continued using the cup as usual...

A chill ran down his spine.

“Different people are cut out for different things. Rodrigo, you might be somewhat better off if you retire and live out your life at a monastery somewhere, instead of aiming to become cardinal.”

Ingrid’s eyes shone with wisdom, even after all these years. They had not changed from the time when he had been called “Shorty”, when he had fallen in love with her. While looking at Ingrid, who was asking for a refill of the atsukan, Rodrigo continued to silently ponder why he had not left the Holy Capital back then.

Chapter 65

Nikujaga

The lively voices of children could be heard from the street.

For the past few days, Aitheria had been busy preparing for the Grand Bazaar. It originated from a festival in the farming villages where they would make a large straw puppet and march in a parade to pray for their harvest to be bountiful next year.

According to Issac, when people had migrated to Aitheria, they had brought the festival along with them.

Today as well, Arnoux laid on the counter in Izakaya Nobu, swinging his legs all day long.

When he got bored of swinging his legs, he tried to convince himself that it was his body that was swinging. When he did that, it was funny because it now felt like his body was swinging around.

“No, this isn’t fun at all.”

Taisho was a bit surprised when Arnoux suddenly got up, but he soon looked back down at the pot.

Recently, Taisho busy experimenting in order to make a new dish.

Arnoux did not know what he was making, but judging from the reactions of both Shinobu and Eva, who tasted it, it was likely to become Nobu’s new specialty.

“Is Arnoux-san prepared for the festival already?”

Taisho asked with a murmur. Shinobu was out on errands, so only Taisho and Arnoux were in the shop. The question was quiet enough that it could have been mistaken as cooking sounds from the pot.

It couldn’t be helped. If he was being a hindrance, he would have been kicked out long ago. This bar had a mysterious atmosphere wrapped around it.

“Strictly speaking, I’m not from Aitheria. That’s why, I’ll only be joining the festival.”

“Ah, does it mean...”

Arnoux finally remembered the reason why Taisho was a little troubled and hesitated in his words.

“This shop is already a proper member of Aitheria, you know. From what I heard, it will soon be the shop’s first anniversary, right?”

“Yeah, that’s actually... correct.”

When Arnoux saw Taisho’s embarrassed smile, he felt like he somewhat understood the reason why this shop was well liked. Everyone was humble. If the employees’ were humble, then the regulars would be too. He wondered whether they were probably drawn to each other.

“There is an old law, you know. If you lived in a city for a year, the city will recognise the person as a resident. That’s why, Izakaya Nobu is a part of Aitheria.”

“How about you, Arnoux-san?”

“I, well, have my own circumstances.”

Arnoux drank his roasted green tea while making a bitter smile. It was his favourite lately. It warmed him up from the bottom of his stomach and made his frustrations disappear to somewhere else.

Only the simmering sounds from the pot filled the shop.

“My younger brother...”

“Hmm?”

Taisho seemed to have heard the monologue that came out from his mouth. He loosened up. Arnoux did not want to talk about himself too much, but he couldn’t just brush it off now.

“I have a younger brother.”

“How much younger?”

“Three years, I guess.”

Although he was usually quiet about it, somehow he felt that the words came out on their own when he spoke to Taisho. He wasn't reluctant. In fact, he might have wanted to talk about it.

"My younger brother is a good fellow, unlike me, and always listens to what my father says. Even in succeeding the family business, many people say my younger brother is a better choice."

"Ah, so that's why you want to become a minstrel?"

"I do want to become a poet, but well, I can't deny that that is a part of my motivation."

Taisho did not say anything, which encouraged Arnoux to continue the story. Arnoux's rational side whispered that he should not reveal too much. However, he was caught up in the shop's warm atmosphere. His face was flushed, and his mouth unconsciously loosened like he was drunk.

"Even though I was apprenticed to father for about two years, it wasn't interesting at all. It was all repeating the basic of the basics. I felt like I could do even more. They said anything new was useless. My younger brother is more suited for that."

Even though he didn't say it out loud, it seemed that he had ran away from home. Taisho nodded without saying anything.

"When Teacher Crowvinkel instructed me to recite a poem, he said that I was running away from something. I realized that it was my family business. However, if I, who is unsuited for the job, were to succeed my father, everyone would be unhappy. It's impossible for me to do the same thing, year after year, until I die."

Now that he had put it into words, Arnoux understood his own feelings for the first time.

He abhorred monotony, so he had longed to become a traveling minstrel.

Now that he thought about it, he was indeed running away, as Crowvinkel had said. Was he so superficial that he could be seen through just from a few lines of his poetry? Or was it Crowvinkel's insight?

Either way, he couldn't even laugh at himself for it.

Taisho silently presented him with a small bowl, filled with a warm, cloudy soup.

"This is the dashi I will be using to cook this time. Try tasting it."

Arnoux nodded and brought it to his mouth.

It had a gentle flavour. Despite that, it also had a strong umami flavour.

“It took me 14 years for me to perfect this dashi.”

“14 years...?”

Although Taisho looked young, he might be nearing 30 soon. 14 years would be about half of his life.

Had it taken all these years to develop this flavor?

Arnoux wanted to ask whether it was only the soup, but he kept his mouth shut. He could not invalidate something that had been improved over the past 14 years.

“Even though I respect you for trying it out for two years, I don’t think you’ve figured out whether or not you’re suited for it yet.”

“No, I do know, I think.”

“If you really want to become a minstrel, why aren’t you immersing yourself in poetry?”

From the back of his throat, a sigh that resembled a groan leaked out.

Arnoux had wanted to respond by saying that he would know whether or not he was suited to becoming a minstrel after two years. However, Taisho had splendidly dodged it.

Attachments.

That was what Taisho wanted to convey. Truthfully, Arnoux had wanted to succeed the family business, but he had made the excuse that he was not suitable to do so.

Wasn’t this running away after all? He asked himself as he gently closed his eyes.

He understood that the basics were important. However, he wanted to be recognised for his talents and introduce new products, one after another. Though, his subordinates were the ones who had to clean up his mess.

Nobuyuki gently placed a dish in front of him.

The dish contained potatoes and meat, which were garnished with carrots and beans. He had never seen this served in Nobu before. Was this the prototype dish Nobuyuki was developing?

“It’s nikujaga. Arnoux-san will be the first customer to eat it.”

(TL note: nikujaga = stewed meat and potatoes)

When he said it like that, it did not feel bad.

Arnoux cut the potatoes with chopsticks, which he had gotten used to recently. He could clearly see how warm and fluffy the potatoes were. They had been well cooked, and they soaked up a lot of the juices in the dish just from being cut open with his chopsticks.

He was surprised when he placed some in his mouth.

The viscous texture was quite similar to the viscosity of the taro that was served in Nobu.

However, this was a potato from around here.

He had grown tired of eating potatoes his whole life.

This taste calmed him. Disregarding the steam, he brought the potato and meat to his mouth.

The strong flavours that had permeated through the food was superior to that of all the other stewed dishes in Nobu. The strong umami flavour from the soup he had tasted earlier had drawn out the every bit of the delicious flavor of the potatoes.

Before he noticed it, the plate was already empty.

“How is it?”

“The potatoes were good. This will be Nobu’s, no, Aitheria’s new signature dish.”

Taisho smiled, and Arnoux followed suit.

It was easy money.

He had intended to hand over the family business to his younger brother, but he was now thinking about this potato.

By making use of various connections and having them eat this nikujaga, he could build a market on the potatoes of this region. He had heard from Isaac that the potatoes cultivated in this area were slightly different from those of other areas.

If he promoted the sales well, the potatoes, which gave off strong impressions of being a poor quality crop, would become a new source of income.

If that happened, poor people would also profit.

“Arnoux-san, you look like you’re thinking of something good.”

“Is that so...?”

He felt a little embarrassed and looked away from Taisho.

In truth, Arnoux probably liked his family business. He had a lot of things he wanted to do, but he probably felt like he couldn't accomplish much if he was unable to have his own way with it. It was unfortunate. After eating just one stewed dish, all of his troubles from the past couple of months had melted away. He had been convinced that he himself was a very difficult person, but it had been a surprisingly simple resolution. Taisho took over 14 years to develop the taste of the soup. Arnoux felt like he should work hard for 14 years too. If it was still no good after that, he would hand it over to his younger brother and train to be a minstrel for fourteen years. It was a life plan that seemed fun.

"Arnoux-sama, are you here?"

"Ah, Isaac. I've come to a good place. Taisho, won't you let Isaac eat that nikujaga?"

Isaac had turned up before anyone noticed and was startled for a moment when he saw that Arnoux was strangely cheerful. However, he seemed to have suppressed it with his strict self-control.

Isaac was Arnoux's subordinate, after all... However, he would have a harder time now than before. Arnoux was forming a resolution.

"Nikujaga, huh? Is this another..."

Isaac ate the nikujaga, using the chopsticks more skillfully than Arnoux had. It was interesting to watch his expression change as he ate the potatoes and the meat.

"Taisho, this is... a really great dish. It's similar to a dish from the North, but that is served with sour cream. This nikujaga is perfect on its own, without relying on any superficial condiments."

"It's *shuhari*, you know."

"*Shuhari*?"

Arnoux asked after hearing an unfamiliar word.

"My teacher taught me those words. When I began to study under him initially, I was an straightforward man. This is the incubation (*shu*). From there, you destroy what was taught to you the first time, the detachment (*ha*). Finally, make things with the

new you, the separation (*ri*)."

"*Shu, ha, ri...*"

Arnoux always carried around a bundle of parchment on his waist to write down inspirations for his poems, and he wrote down the word, "*shuhari*". From now on, he would definitely write down lots of things unrelated to poetry.

"It's a good saying, right, Arnoux-sama?"

The reason Isaac's tone sounded slightly spiteful was probably because Arnoux had thrown away his father's way of living after two years.

He had been frustrated that he couldn't retort then, but it was different now.

"Isaac, I'll succeed the house."

"Eh..."

Isaac dropped his chopsticks in surprise at the sudden declaration.

That was expected. Arnoux had kept telling Isaac that he did not want to succeed the house until this morning. Something must have happened for him to change his mind. If Arnoux suddenly said it like this, it wouldn't be surprising for Isaac to think that it was a joke.

However, Isaac's reaction was bigger than expected.

"Con-congratulations!"

Isaac got up from his chair and bowed so low that one would think his back would break. Tears were streaming down his face when he raised his head.

It would have been difficult to imagine that he could show so much joy based on his usual serious demeanor.

"This Isaac, having served Arnoux-sama ever since we were milk brothers, has never been happier than this!"

Shinobu, who had just come back, looked flustered as she tried to catch up with the situation.

"Arnoux-sama, it's a celebration. We should celebrate today!"

“A-ah, I don’t really care for that...”

“You don’t have to worry about money! I have taken care of the money that your father gave us!”

When Arnoux looked at Taisho for help, he was answered with a smile.

Arnoux saw Taishou skillfully begin to prepare the food and knew that it was probably already set in stone.

There was a large party that evening, and Arnoux paid for everyone who came.

The next morning, it was declared that the Marquis of Sachnussenburg, Arnoux XV, would succeed the entire territory of the marquis that surrounded Aitheria.

(TLC: Arnoux XV doesn’t mean Arnoux the 15th, but the 15th generation Marquis, Arnoux)

Chapter 66

The Grand Bazaar of Aitheria (Part 1)

The first day of the Grand Bazaar was sunny again this year.

Even last year and the year before that, the weather mysteriously cleared up on this day.

As far as Marcel knew, or at least since his great grandfather's time, there had never been a drop of rain on this day.

However, the chill was still harsh. During this time of year, if it wasn't raining, it was cold. The old and thin Marcel, who was thickly dressed in baggy clothing, gathered his clothing merchandise.

Marcel was secretly relieved that the Grand Bazaar would launch just like last year.

It wouldn't be a pleasant thing if something bad happened as soon as he became the chairman of the City Council.

At any rate, the previous chairman, Bachschouf, was now a criminal. Marcel, who had been recommended by the council because of his position as the Master of the Textile Crafts Guild, was the safest choice. His only wish was that everything would end with no serious mistakes.

Marcel would have to climb the stairs of the main gate to greet the approaching sunrise and recite a prayer from the scriptures to the Goddess.

He hoped that many merchants would gather this year.

The amount of business that took place during the Grand Bazaar determined how much tax revenue Aitheria received. If possible, he wished for as many merchants to come as possible.

As he rubbed his hands together to warm them up, he ascended the staircase to reach the bell tower. Once the City Council Chairman rang the bell, the Grand Bazaar would

commence. This prestigious role was a privilege of being the City Council Chairman, but it was also a responsibility.

Marcel had another concern, but the opening of the Grand Bazaar was the top priority for now.

Holger and Gernot, who were on duty this year, were already waiting by the observation window, where they could see past the main gate. The both of them seemed to be so busy looking out the window that they didn't notice Marcel.

"Ehem."

Marcel cleared his throat with utmost dignity. Even though Marcel was past 60 and still had some vigour, he was just a figurehead for the City Council. The balance of influence between Bachschouf's faction and the current mainstream faction was being unsteadily maintained.

Even so, there were two people who were likely to listen to him: Holger and Gernot. It was because of this that he had nominated these two people for this job.

However, for some reason, they did not turn around, even when he cleared his throat.

He cleared his throat lightly again, thinking they had not heard it, but it was ignored a second time.

At this point, it was useless. Marcel humbled himself and decided to greet them.

"Good morning, both of you. Did the line of carriages you could see extend past the front hill this year?"

From the bell tower, one could see three hills along the highway. There was one in front, one in the middle, and one at the back.

If the carriages and convoys extended beyond the middle hill, the Grand Bazaar would be a great success, but in the last few years, the line of carriages had failed to even reach the front hill, due to the issue with the Northern Three Territories.

Marcel had higher expectations this year, since the situation in the North had calmed down.

“Oh, Chairman. This is a little...”

“This might sound a little crude.”

Holger and Gernot both gave ominous sounding responses, and Marcel’s stomach tightened.

Had the line of carriages failed to reach the front hill? If that was the case, there would be less revenue than he had predicted. There were a lot of things he wanted to work on as the Council Chairman, such as repairing the city walls and dredging the canals. It would be good if he could secure enough revenue to start work on them.

“Is that so... I was prepared, to an extent. So, how many came? You still need more fingers than you have on your hands to count them, right?”

“Both hands, huh. What do you think, Gernot?”

“That would be a little difficult.”

Marcel’s shoulders dropped when he watched Gernot literally counting with his fingers. It might have been better to buy stomach medicine from the flourishing pharmacy that had recently opened on Inns & Stable Street.

It was only the first year of his term, and such a terrible situation had already come up.

He wanted to apologise to the citizens who were looking forward to the Grand Bazaar, but there probably wasn’t going to be one next year, given this year’s insufficient experience.

“Then again, hasn’t it been a long time since more than ten crest-bearing carriages came?”

“There has been no record of that for at least the past ten years.”

“Crests...?”

Marcel tilted his head at their exchange.

Carriages bore crests if there were distinguished people inside.

If anything, it was customary for Baron Branton and Marquis Sachnnussenburg to come to Aitheria's Grand Bazaar. Some nobles might come incognito, but nobles who visited publicly with a crest bearing carriage were rare.

"Marquis Sachnussenburg and Baron Branton attend every year... what are the other crests, Gernot?"

"That crest belongs to the Count of Bardenburg, His Excellency Johann Gustav. After that are the Counts of the Three Northern Territories: Count Wyndelmarc, Count Karlsenmarc, and Count Sistinemarc. Then is minstrel Baron Crowvinkel and the district Archbishop, perhaps? There's even the flag of a Cardinal from the Rupsia. How unusual."

Marcel couldn't believe the lineup of eminent people that Gernot had suddenly listed, so he stuck his head out of the observation window.

It was an unbelievable spectacle.

Banners, carried by knights who were leading the way for crest bearing carriages, fluttered on top of the front hill, and carriages stretched out endlessly behind them. The amount of luggage transported was often inflated if there were many escorts, but this year was different. Due to the fact that the retainers of royalty and nobility were leading the procession, the scale was not even comparable to that of an average year.

The line continued up the furthest hill, and there were no doubts that it continued even further beyond that.

Just what in the world had happened?

"Hey, hasn't this suddenly become serious, Chairman?"

"We do not have enough lodgings for the officially visiting nobles. The Council must hold an emergency meeting and assign hosts for them. Of course, we shouldn't leave out lodgings for the merchants and escorts either."

"Oh, yeah... we need to prepare dinner for them, too."

"No, it might be better to ask about their arrangements first."

The way Gernot spoke, as if his words were stuck on the tip of his tongue, showed his

doubt. It wasn't likely that the nobles would go out to bars to eat and drink as they pleased.

There were some prestigious shops, but it would just cause more pressure, since there were a limited number of them. His head hurt.

Marcel searched for some parchment in his pockets, since he wanted to write down the things he had to do. At that moment, a letter fell down onto the floor with a thud.

"What's that letter, Chairman?"

"It seems to be on a fairly good quality piece of parchment."

"Yes, I also wanted to consult with you two about this."

When it was unrolled so that they could read it, the words flowed in a way that made it seem that it wasn't meant to be understood.

"The person named Damien, who has been captured in your city, is under the protection of the Eastern Kingdom (Oiria). He is to be released as soon as possible. From, Princess Regent of the Eastern Kingdom, Celestine de Oiria..."What?"

Regarding the Princess Regent Celestine, she was an important person who ruled over the nation in the place of the young King Jurg. Why was this person purposely writing about a criminal in Aitheria?

"There is certainly a man called Damien in prison, but..."

"What's his crime?"

"He was the instigator behind the witch hunt. He seems to have been under the protection of the Archbishop, but that relationship was broken."

"I don't understand this at all."

The three of them nodded silently at each other. This was surely an elaborate prank. The parchment was excellent, but it became even more suspicious because it didn't have the seal of the Princess Regent.

"Anyway, the Grand Bazaar is more important right now."

“That’s also true. Chairman, please ring the bell.”

“Ah, right.”

After he cleared his throat, Marcel reached out for the rope extending from the bell.

Once he pulled this, the Grand Bazaar would commence.

He had lived while being swept along by the currents until now, so at the very least, he wanted to pull this rope by his own will.

While thinking that, Marcel glanced outside through the window again and saw something that was not supposed to be there.

On top of the hill, a large banner depicting “a three-headed dragon and a hawk’s talon” was fluttering in the sky.

“Hi-His Majesty the former Emperor!”

Marcel, who had almost collapsed from the surprise, grabbed onto the nearest object in a hurry.

Ding, dong. Ding, dong...

The heavy bell rang when the rope was pulled, and the sentry corps, who were on standby, removed the latch of the grand gate of Aitheria.

The head of the convoy slowly began to head for the gate, and those behind followed it down the hill like a small wave.

Somewhere, someone whistled, and the bells and drums began to sound.

Thus, the curtains of Aitheria’s Grand Bazaar opened.

Chapter 67

The Grand Bazaar of Aitheria (Part 2)

“Even though the Grand Bazaar just started, it has become quite lively.”

Shinobu was looking at the stream of people flowing in front of the store through a gap in the glass door.

Normally, the traffic would consist mostly of a few stable boys, but due to the Grand Bazaar, the street was bustling.

Even though the sun was about to set, the number of people kept increasing. The harvest festival would be at its peak when night came. The festival would continue throughout the night.

Some of the foreign merchants set up their shops in the streets to avoid spending too much money on lodgings. The liveliness coming from the ambitious young merchants gathered on Inns and Stables street could rival the amount present in the heart of Aiteria.

“Young miss, would you like to buy something?”

A merchant with dark skin peeked into the gap in the glass door and began advertising his wares. He was holding a few pieces of parchment paper in his hand.

Shinobu, who had recently learned how to read a few of the characters, saw what appeared to be written poetry at first glance.

“It’s a love poem composed by Crowvinkel in his early days. This is a good deal. It’s perfect for young ladies like you.”

“Eh... but...”

A hand stretched out from behind the hesitating Shinobu and snatched the bundle of parchment paper.

“H-hey, grandpa! What are you doing!”

“Oh no, I never wrote love poems in my early days. I was interested in what kind of things were circulating.”

Crowvinkel himself was skimming through the poem.

Had the merchant who had been trying to sell them recognized his face? He stood there speechless. He had not expected that such a famous minstrel would be at a bar in the outskirts of town.

“Hummu. This isn’t a very good counterfeit. If you want to fool somebody, you should study poetic forms a little bit more. Oh, but the quality of the parchment seems close to the ones I use. I’ll commend you on only that.”

Crowvinkle said as he pushed the parchment back toward the merchant. The merchant said nothing as he disappeared into the crowd.

“He didn’t even utter a thanks... should I not have corrected him?”

In addition to Crowvinkel, who leaked out a chuckle, people who occasionally patronised Nobu were busy picking at their food inside the shop.

“Shinobu-chan, please help out a little!”

“Yes!”

Nobuyuki had been preparing a large pot of nikujaga while the other dishes were served up one after another.

The former Emperor and Johann Gustav were sitting by the counter, together with Hildgarde and her husband, the Imperial Prince Maximilian. They were enjoying a small pot of boiled tofu with bean paste.

Maximilian was just 11 years old, a year younger than Hildegard. He initially seemed nervous to be having dinner with his grandfather, the former Emperor, but he was now blowing and eating the boiled tofu after being taught by his wife, Hildegard.

“Hey, Maximilian, your mouth is dirty.”

“Ah, thanks. Hilda.”

The sight of the young bride wiping her younger, newly-wed husband’s mouth was heartwarming.

“What a dependable niece, right, Johann Gustav?”

“It’s in your blood, dear uncle.”

Johann Gustav, who had developed a taste for hot sake instead of lager, responded tipsily.

“Look at those two... don’t you think you should settle down already?”

“My cousin, His Majesty, should marry first. Since he’s the Emperor, he needs to choose someone soon.”

“You always say thatttt...”

It sounded like an ordinary bar conversation, but it was about the leader of the Empire.

Shinobu put on a strained smile while trying to eavesdrop as little as possible and continued serving the dishes.

Even though one table was being used as a buffet stand, there still wasn’t much space inside the store.

She was worried about whether there was enough food, even though there was only this many people. Since the next plate was emptied as soon as it arrived, there was no time for Nobuyuki to rest. It was a lavish feast of alcohol and food.

“Now then, is it alright to ban all forms of witch hunting from now on?”

“That might be appropriate. Although I was searching for a witch the whole time, there were almost no witches remaining in the neighbouring three countries, including the Empire.”

In the corner of the shop, Cardinal Hürghigegot and Archbishop Rodrigo were having a conversation while smacking their lips at their pudding. The Magisterium would make a big fuss if they found out that the bigshots of the reformist and the traditionalist factions met up in this kind of place, but an agreement seemed to have been formed safely.

Since both factions had some extremists, the discussion had to be made secretly. Even Ingrid and Edwin, who were nearby, had to be kept away.

Enrico, who had followed the Archbishop, was eating a few cups of chawanmushi. Edwin had gone to the Holy Kingdom on a certain errand to call Hürghigegot, but unexpectedly, the former trainee priests had decided to arranged tables to meet up in the Holy Kingdom, since it had been several decades. The atmosphere felt like an class reunion instead of a meeting to decide important matters.

“So, Ingrid. Even though I paid the tab at the “Prancing Pony” Pavilion, I’d be happy if you could pay me back gradually.”

“No, no, Senior Edwin. Didn’t you pay it out of your own free will? I’ll feel troubled if you say you paid it off in full when we’ve just met again after so long.”

Her disciple, Camilla, hid her face at her teacher’s attitude of trying to slip her way out of the topic like an eel.

She had takoyaki in her hand. She quickly became friends with Eva, who was almost the same age, and exchanged the takoyaki sauce with soy sauce.

It seemed that Ingrid’s wish for Camilla to make friends had come true.

Shinobu had secretly prepared the takoyaki machine for the Grand Bazaar, and the one in charge of it was Leontaine, the female mercenary.

It should have been her first time operating it, but she was strangely skilled with it.

“You’re pretty good at making takoyaki.”

“The trick is in the flick of the wrist, isn’t it? It’s similar to fencing. By the way, can’t we put squid in this?”

Leontaine had returned home to the Eastern Kingdom, but the quiet life there had not suited her.

She had resumed her mercenary career and was employed as an escort by Cardinal Hürghigegot and Edwin, who wanted to set out to Aitheria. Since the contract only required her to escort them to Aitheria, she decided live here for a while. She had asked Nobuyuki to hire her, since Helmina’s belly was getting a little bigger.

Everyone in Izakaya Nobu were enjoying themselves.

There were delicious dishes and drinks, as well as customers who enjoyed them.

When Leontaine saw those faces, she felt like this was a true store.

“Shinobu-chan, my best regards.”

“Everyone, this is today’s new dish~”

Nobuyuki served up the large pot of nikujaga. After several repeated trials today, it had finally satisfied both of their tastes and been completed. With the strength of the potatoes that had been grown in Eva’s house, he had confidence that the flavours would not embarrass him, no matter where he served it.

The first to take a bowl of the new dish was Crowvinkel.

He tried a mouthful before, with gleaming eyes, he took two or three more mouthfuls.

“It’s delicious. Even though I felt the dashimaki was magical, there is strength in this nikujaga too.”

It seemed Branton, a glass of wine in one hand, was also enjoying the nikujaga.

He asked Reinhold, who was close by, whether it could be made with the potatoes in his own territory, but he only received a vague smile in return.

Marcel, the new Chairman, sat in a corner of the shop, gulping down his beer as he watched the bowls of nikujaga disappear one after another.

“I don’t understand. What is happening? I don’t understand why all the royals and nobles came from afar just to eat this new dish in this izakaya...”

“The food here is delicious, but it’s not just that, Boss Marcel.”

Holger, who was accompanying the Marcel that could not believe what he saw anymore, emptied his second serving of nikujaga. He was now on his third bowl.

“What in the world is all this commotion about, Holger?”

“Well, it’ll probably begin soon.”

Someone clapped their hands together loudly, and everyone’s attention gathered at the back of the shop.

Silence filled the store, which had been noisy till then, and Isaac, who was wearing a uniform according to the ancient traditions, bowed reverently to the audience.

“Thank you for attending the coronation of My Lord, Marquis of Sachnussenburg, Arnoux Schneifels. I truly appreciate it.”

As soon as Isaac’s speech was over, Arnoux, who was magnificently dressed in a deep

blue ceremonial dress, dashingly appeared from the back.

It was as if that figure of a gambler had been a lie; he could only be seen as a nobleman, no matter how you looked at him.

After Arnoux looked over everyone attending the party with a dignified look, he gave them a charming, flawless bow.



“Thank you very much for gathering today. I am Marquis of Sachnussenburg, Arnoux Schneifels. By the Grace of the God, the Goddess, and the Sun, I shall take up the title as Arnoux XV.”

Was it because of his training as a minstrel that he had not stuttered when making that long declaration?

As Cardinal Hürghigegot congratulated the Marquis. It seemed that Edwin had taken the trouble of calling him for this.

When everyone followed the former Emperor’s applause, Shinobu nudged Nobuyuki’s elbow and asked,

“Hey, Taisho. How important is a marquis?”

“I don’t know whether the titles in this world have the same meaning as in our world, but it’s higher than barons, viscounts, and counts.”

“Heeh, Arnoux-san is amazing. If he is a marquis, he might not come anymore.”

“Who knows. We’ll see about that. Though, it seems that he will be strongly chewed out by his father for a while.”

The previous generation Marquis had been very angry with Arnoux, who had bailed out on his work once.

However, since he could not continue his duty due to his severe lower back pain, it seemed that he wanted to take the opportunity to abdicate during the Grand Bazaar, betting on Arnoux agreeing to succeed him. They seem to have thought that Arnoux would yield and change his mind if the Cardinal was invited to the coronation.

Nevertheless, it seemed he was pleased that Arnoux had decided to succeed him voluntarily. It had not been a waste to have Edwin, who was close to Hürghigegot, call the cardinal here.

“I hope he will become a good marquis.”

“I’m sure he will.”

Shinobu heard someone request a refill of beer and quickly went to fulfill the order. After the coronation ceremony was over, the plan was to treat them by charging nothing for the large pot of nikujaga.

The soldiers of the sentry corps, the other regulars, and Eva’s younger siblings had all

been invited to the tasting party.

Arnoux would bear the costs of all the materials and labour. It was a strategy to advertise the deliciousness of the potatoes grown in the Sachnussenburg territory to the merchants who had gathered from neighboring countries.

Isaac had informed them that as Arnoux's first act as a marquis, he had signed an official paper approving the payment to Izakaya Nobu.

Shinobu thought it was good if opening a shop here had made the people of Aitheria a little bit happier. It was like fates calling out to each other, bringing about new encounters.

It had been one year since they opened the shop in Aitheria through a mystical force. It was a pleasant surprise for both Shinobu and Nobuyuki that they were able to welcome so many customers.

"I hope we will be welcome at the Grand Bazaar again next year as well, right?"

"Next year, I want it to be even more livelier."

They could hear traditional chants wishing for a bountiful harvest echoing through the streets.

The night feast was still young.

Chapter 68

An End With Yuzu Sherbet

When the first yuzu of the season was grated, a refreshing scent spread through the shop.

After the Grand Bazaar, Aitheria's weather had become remarkably more winter-like. There was more snowfall than rain, and quite a lot of frost formed in the mornings. It was to the extent that the lively citizens had closed their windows as they prepared for the cold weather.

A kettle began to bellow out steam.

Shinobu had not made yuzu sherbet in a long time, but her hands still remembered what to do.

Shortly after the Grand Bazaar, Bertholt had consulted with her about Helmina's recently poor appetite. They had heard that sour and non-greasy foods could be stomachached, but both of them were surprised, as they had not experienced someone's pregnancy before.

After consulting with Nobuyuki about various foods that were easy to eat, she decided to try making yuzu sherbet today.

She was preparing them to be served in the store tonight, as she had finished preparing the portion set aside for Helmina.

She added plenty of yuzu juice and grated yuzu skin into the melted sugar.

In Yukitsuna, it was a recipe that was served as a seasonal dessert.

Customers who wanted to eat sweet things after finishing their main course had been increasing since they started to serve their deluxe puddings.

If she could make it successfully, she wanted to add it to the winter menu.

"It smells good..."

Arnoux turned up unexpectedly, after being lured in by the smell.

Even after officially taking up the position of the marquis, he still visited Nobu occasionally and ate tempura or the daily special.

"Is it okay? For you to sneak out again."

“Inspection of the friendly neighbouring cities is also one of the important tasks of a lord. Also, I have an errand at the City Council.”

Many of the crops harvested in the territory of Marquis Sachnussenburg were consumed in Aitheria. In other words, this town was the biggest trading partner for Arnoux.

“But, it seems like Hans-kun has also gotten used to his work. When I heard he quit the sentry corps, I thought I’d ask him to work for the Marquis house, but...”

“Thank you very much. I appreciate your thoughts.”

Hans, who had regretfully retired from the sentry corps, was now undergoing training to open up his own stall. When Nobuyuki was busy, Hans helped out by peeling vegetables, and he was struggling to emulate the flavors from Nobu.

Nobuyuki had guided junior chefs during his time at Yukitsuna, and now he had finally found a disciple worth teaching from the ground up.

“Do you want to eat something?”

Shinobu asked, but Arnoux shook his head.

“I shall decline today. I may not look like it, but a marquis is surprisingly busy.”

Arnoux swung around with his hands behind his back, filled with confidence and motivation.

Even though there had been a certain charm to him when he had been a gambler, his back looked lively now.

She was sure this suited him.

“Hm, did someone come?”

Nobuyuki came in through the back door, as if to replace Arnoux. It was rare to see Nobuyuki, who was carrying a wrapper, in plain clothes.

“It was Arnoux-kun. He was inspecting Aitheria.”

“He should have tried the trial yuzu sherbet.”

“He seems busy.”

“That’s a given.”

While giving a half-hearted reply, Nobuyuki began to inspect the potatoes that Hans had peeled.

He picked up a knife and started to peel one while smiling at Hans, who looked nervous. The skin Nobu peeled was thinner than the ones that Hans had peeled.

“I like to leave more behind for people to eat as well, but vegetables and fruits also have a lot of umami beneath the skin. You should peel them as thin as possible, so that customers will get to eat it, got it?”

“Yes!”

Nobuyuki’s tone today was similar to that of Yukitsuna’s head chef, Tonohara.

It wasn’t surprising, as he had gone to meet him today. He wanted to have his teacher, Tonohara, try the nikujaga.

That was the reason Nobuyuki had gone out today.

The nikujaga had been packed in a stacked food box to let it soak in its own flavour, so that it would be seasoned perfectly. It was a taste that had Shinobu’s stamp of approval, so it wouldn’t be embarrassing if it was served in the ryotei.

“How did it go with Tonohara-san?”

Nobuyuki didn’t answer, but gave a thumbs up. It had probably gone well.

If the taste was that good, no one would have any complaints.

“It’s thanks to Shinobu-chan for tasting it.”

“It’s all because of your hard work.”

As a chef, he had crossed a mountain. Now, Nobuyuki had a sense of security.

It was likely that he would pass the technique on to Hans, too.

He suddenly felt a presence and looked towards the glass door, where two people were standing.

Shinobu greeted the figures, which were holding hands, with a sincere smile.

“Welcome!”

“...elcome.”

Today as well, in a corner of Aitheria, Izakaya Nobu was open for business.





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